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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 33, No. 13, Mid-December, 1988. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., \$2.00 per copy in the U.S.A. \$2.50 in Canada. Annual subscription \$25.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$29.50 elsewhere payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 1932, Marion, O. 43305. Call (614)383-341 with questions regarding your subscription. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian 3rd class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario © 1988 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 1932, Marion, Ohio 43305. In Canada return to 871 Janette Ave., Windsor, Ontario N9C3Z1.

ISSN: 0002-5224

GUEST EDITORIAL

by
Elana Lore

The holidays are approaching, and for many of us, they're rather stressful, what with fighting crowds at the shopping center, trying to pretend we're in the holiday spirit, and spending a lot of time with people we don't really like all that much—such as relatives.

It's the time when your aged Aunt Jezebel with the screechy voice, who is always after the kids to behave and clean up their rooms, decides to come and stay with you for a week. And you just have to go to Cousin Delia Mae's annual family Christmas party. It can push a person to the brink. If you begin to feel a little edgy as the Big Day approaches, here are a few

things you should know before you do something rash.

Hijacking the airplane that's taking you against your will to spend the holidays with your wife's relatives can get you nineteen years to life in the slammer, depending on the circumstances.

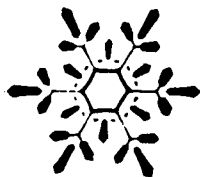
And burglarizing the home of your loudmouthed Cousin Ted to get back the present you gave him after you had that little altercation can cost you two to fourteen years in the company of people who are perhaps even more unpleasant.

Assault with intent to commit murder on the aforementioned Cousin Ted is not the answer either—it could cost you
(continued on page 25)

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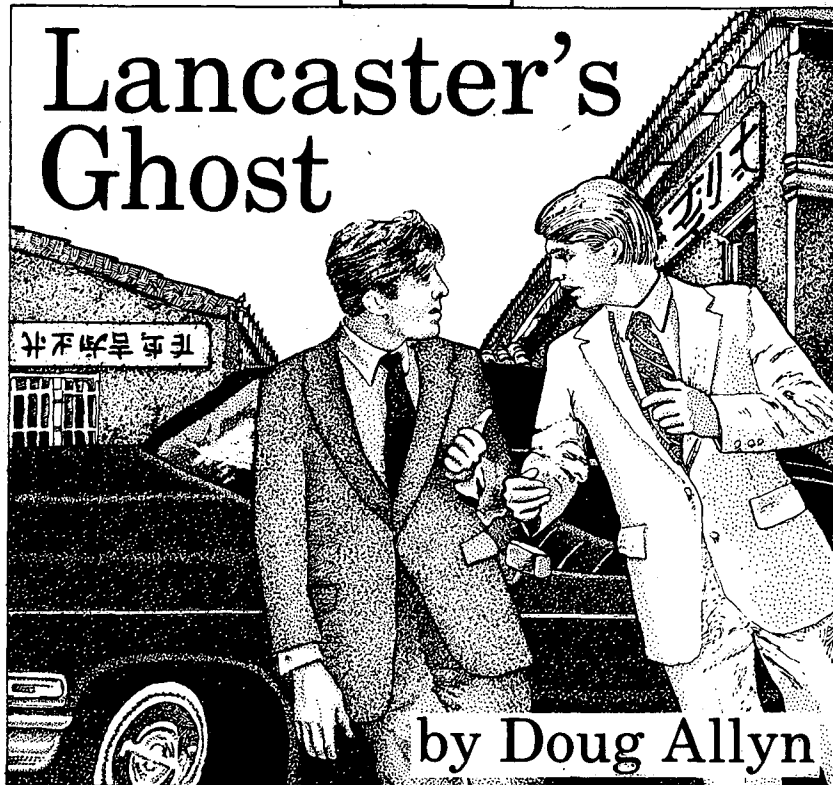
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Lancaster's Ghost



by Doug Allyn

Six weeks after Fred Chen's death, Lau Liang decided to bury him. The full term of formal mourning still had a few weeks to run, but Liang's an impatient man, and he got tired of sharing his living room with his brother-in-law's casket. To avoid any appearance of *dyoulyan*, a lack of respect, he gave Fred a heckuva sendoff, a traditional Taiwanese funeral worthy of a head of state.

The multitude assembled at Liang's villa on Grass Mountain for Daoist/Confucianist rites, then marched somberly through the suburbs to the municipal cemetery east of Taipei, in a cortege that stretched over two kilometers, made up of three hundred-plus Liang and Chen family members, shirttail relatives, friends, and a fair number of folks who joined in along the way out of simple curiosity.

Zhongxue marching bands

fore and aft blatted tuneless Taiwanese dirges that roiled and swirled above the procession, clashing with the wailing of fifty professional mourners dressed in hooded burlap robes, their eyes reddened with L'Oréal, sobbing their mercenary hearts out for ten bucks a head. Solemn teenagers dressed in funereal white uniforms paced the outer ranks of the parade bearing larger-than-life picture posters of a smiling Fred, so gawkers along the way could see who the fuss was about.

I stepped with measured tread in the Liang family group a few paces behind the flower-draped motor ark that carried the late lamented. It's difficult to cling to grief in the middle of all the hoopla, which is the point of it, I suppose, but I for one sincerely regretted Fred's passing. Not only was he a friend, but he'd gotten me my present job, and his untimely demise left me stranded in Taiwan, eight thousand miles from home, almost broke, and probably soon to be unemployed. I looked gloomier than the professional wailers, and nobody'd paid me a dime.

And then I spotted Harry Lancaster. Or at least for a moment I thought I did. Just a glimpse of a blond head moving through the crowd lining the curbs as the cortege snaked out of the city toward the cemetery.

And my spirits lifted a little. I'd always liked Harry, and it seemed appropriate, while marching in the funeral of one friend, to see the ghost of another.

The following day I saw the ghost again. He strolled into the Buick dealership I manage for Lau Liang looking as sleek and prosperous as a televangelist. As though he'd been to Club Med for a weekend instead of dead for nearly thirteen years.

"I, ah, have to admit they did one helluva job on you, Harry," I said. "You look better than you did when you were alive."

"Dying's not so bad," he said. "Maybe you should try it. You look like last week's laundry."

"Thank you. Must be all the grieving I've been doing lately. Some of it unnecessary, apparently. I, ah, hate to sound like somebody's mom, but you didn't write, you didn't call. Where the hell have you been?"

"Burma, mostly, and—around. Look, can we go somewhere and talk?"

"Why not here?"

"Humor me, Charlie, I'm a ghost, remember?"

"Yeah, right. Tell you what, I'll buy lunch. You tell me how you managed to come back from the grave."

"You want the secret of life for a free lunch? Seems to me

it ought to be worth at least a couple of beers, too."

"I'll be damned," I said softly. "It really is you."

Lunch was an open air noodle stand off Chungshan Road near the dealership, a few rickety, umbrella-shaded tables on the sidewalk.

"Quaint," Harry sniffed, eyeing the area like a lord in a leper colony. "Still into life's simpler pleasures, I see."

"The guy makes good noodles and I'm too broke to put on airs. Now give. I pulled courier duty to Bangkok and didn't get back to Saigon until just before the city fell. I heard you'd bought it in a plane crash. So what happened?"

"Do you, ah, remember Julie Yin, the Chinese girl from Cholon District I was seeing?"

"Sure. A stunner, as I recall, wealthy family. So?"

"So we got married."

"Usually a serious mistake, but not always fatal."

"It was this time. Look, the city was under siege, we were pulling out, and the military had commandeered all transport. Julie wouldn't abandon her family, soooo . . . I, ah, bought us an airplane, Charlie, an Air American C-47. It was the only way I could get them out. The guy I bought the plane from had to list it as destroyed to cover himself, and since it's

tough to resign your commission in the middle of a war, I died in the crash. Simple as that."

"Was it?"

"How do you mean?"

"Come on, Harry, this is me, remember? A lot of people were trying to get out. Rich, influential people. Buying a plane must have cost *beaucoup* bucks. Like how much?"

"You're quick, Marks," Harry nodded, smiling, "you always were. A quarter of a million U.S. In gold."

"A quarter of—? Julie's father had that kind of money?"

"Not exactly, no."

"So where'd you get it?"

Harry stared through me for a moment, reading me like a grubby paperback. I slurped my noodles, ignoring the look. But I didn't like it much. I felt like a rabbit on a railroad track.

"How much do you know about the Golden Triangle?" he asked abruptly.

"A little. It's the no-man's-land where Burma, Laos, and Thailand intersect. Opium country, controlled by local warlords, right?"

"More or less. The headman is a Chinese general named Yin Su Har."

"Yin? Related to Julie's family?"

"Her uncle. My esteemed father-in-law's brother. I married into a tong, Charlie, maybe

the biggest in the world."

"Whoopee," I sighed.

"You don't approve?"

"I don't give a damn one way or the other. I'm no saint, Harry, and if you want to work for the Chinese Mafia, that's your business. But we were friends in 'Nam, or at least I thought we were. When you got killed . . . Well, I lost too many friends there, Harry. It would have been nice to hear somebody I cared about got out in one piece."

"If I'd—oh, hell, when you're right, you're right. I should have found a way to let you know. I, ah, apologize. Fair enough?"

"Yeah, terrific. So why don't we skip the hearts and flowers and get to it?"

"Get to it?"

"Gimme a break, Harry. All these years, not a word. I don't figure you popped out of the grave just to say hello."

"No," he said, eyeing me thoughtfully, "as a matter of fact I didn't."

"The family intends to transfer some assets to Taiwan, unofficially," Harry said, glancing absently into the storefront aquarium of a seafood restaurant as we wandered through the commercial district toward the Tam Sui Bridge.

"Smuggling, in other words."

"Exactly," he smiled. "For-

give me if I seem obtuse. I've been dealing with my inscrutable in-laws for a long time."

"Look, no offense, Harry, but I don't want anything to do with drugs."

"No drugs, strictly a financial transaction. We're going to purchase several Taiwanese firms. Since local ownership's required by law, the assets will be distributed among our people here."

"What kind of assets?"

"Diamonds. Two hundred one-carat flawless D's."

"How much is that in American?"

"Roughly four million dollars, U.S."

"Jesus." I paused midway across the bridge and stared down into the milk chocolate waters of the Tam Sui. A few fishermen in narrow, one-man pirogues were shrimping near the banks. "Harry, I don't think I can help you. You're way out of my league."

"You have to help me. There's no one else."

"Are you in some kind of a jam?"

"Not exactly, but I'm in . . . a difficult position. The tong is multinational, an empire—"

"Built on Golden Triangle drug money."

"True enough," he admitted, "but its real strength is in family ties. Tong means family, and in a way, that's the prob-

lem. I'm the only high ranking non-Chinese member a tong's ever had, but to the people with real power, I'm still just the round-eye who married the boss's niece. They don't even bother to hide their contempt. Bringing these stones in is the first shot I've had to prove myself, and I'm not going to blow it. We're going to manage it on our own, without any help from the family."

"You're saying *we*, but I don't see how I can help."

Harry rested his elbows on the railing beside me, slipped a cigarette from a platinum case, and lit up, squinting into the rancid river breeze. "Your boss, Mr. Liang, bought diamonds in Hong Kong earlier this year," he said quietly. "He didn't declare them when he returned here."

"Even if that's so, he wouldn't tell me anything. I just sell cars for the guy, and I probably won't be doing that much longer."

"Don't play dumb with me, Charlie, it won't wash. You might not know exactly how he did it, but you know something. I'd bet my life on it. Or yours."

So much for auld lang syne. "I suppose I—may know a little. Liang's businesses are mostly legitimate, and he wouldn't risk smuggling anything himself. He'd contract it out. Maybe I know who handled it for him,

maybe not. Can we talk a deal?"

"Sure, assuming your information's correct. What do you want?"

"Out," I said. Harry arched an eyebrow a quarter of an inch, saying more with a look than I could in a three page memo. "I've had—some trouble with the local law, and I'm pretty much at the end of my rope here," I explained. "I want a new passport, and, oh, say three grand U.S. That's it."

"Considering the amounts in question," he frowned, "you aren't driving a particularly hard bargain."

"Maybe I figure my chances of collecting are better if it's cheaper for your people to let me go than . . . not to."

"I'd never let that happen and you know it."

"Maybe not," I sighed. "Maybe I'm getting too old for this kind of thing. Anyway, that's all I want. Deal?"

"Deal," he said, flipping his cigarette away, scattering sparks into the murk below.

"Now, who handled it?"

"A woman. A little old lady, in fact."

"Her name is Isobel Petrie," I said, bouncing off Harry's shoulder as our cab driver made a kamikaze cut across two lanes of traffic. "She runs a curio shop

now, but she used to be CIA. Liang went to see her just before his trip to Hong Kong, and again after he got back, so maybe she moved the stones for him or knows who did."

"We'll never find out if we don't get there alive!" Harry shouted. "*Hai, Pengyou, man yidiar haubuhau!*"

The driver actually slowed a little, which surprised me since I couldn't see any pedestrians he was trying to pick off. Then he swung a hard right and skidded broadside into the curb, nearly tossing us over the front seat. "Shay Moun," he smirked, holding out his hand for the fare.

A young Eurasian woman watched us cross the sidewalk to the Jade Mountain Shop, and deliberately closed the door in our faces.

"Hey," I said, tapping on the glass. She ignored me, and flipped the OPEN sign over to CLOSED, a brown sparrow of a girl, dark hair, widely spaced eyes, wearing a dun Mao suit, living proof that the myth of Eurasian beauty is exactly that. "Come on, lady," I said, "we don't want trouble but we're not going away, so open up. Please?"

Reluctantly, she opened the door a crack. "We're closed," she said, "come back another—"

"You just unclosed," I said, pushing the door open, "and we want to see Isobel Petrie."

The girl stepped away from the door and set herself in a karate stance, blocking the narrow aisle like Horatio at the bridge.

"It's all right, Holuan, let them come in." A tall, horse-faced woman in a mandarin-collared white blouse and dark skirt rose unsteadily from a rattan barstool behind the counter, eyeing us warily, but without fear. Fiftyish or so, with a frizzed, steel-gray permanent, she looked like a spinster librarian after a two week bender.

"Miss Petrie," I said, "I'm Jerry Baxter, and—"

"Spare me," she snapped, cutting me off. "I know who you are. What is it you want?"

"You know who we are?" Harry said, arching that eyebrow.

"Your friend here works for Lau Liang as a jack-of-all-trades, master of nothing in particular," Isobel sighed, "and unless I'm greatly mistaken, Blondie, you're General Yin's round-eye son-in-law. They said you were handsome. They exaggerated."

"Who said?" Harry asked.

"*Renren dou shuo,*" Isobel said vaguely. "Nothing sinister about it. I'm a lonely widow, and people talk, that's all. I deal in odds and ends, gentlemen, jade and ivory curios, antique Chinese tea sets. I even have a shrunken head, Japanese I be-

lieve, circa World War II. Interested? Make you a good price on it."

"Ah, no," I said, "actually we're more interested in one of your—other services."

"Then step into my parlor said the spider to the flies," she said, stifling a cough with a gnarled fist. "This way, unless you'd rather talk business in public. Holuan, bring us some beer." She hobbled painfully toward the rear of the shop, leaning on a cane, muttering to herself. Harry and I exchanged glances.

"Shrunk head?" he said.

"Probably the late Mr. Petrie," I said.

"Why the hassle at the front door," I asked, taking a pull from a lukewarm bottle of San Miguel, "trying to attract customers with reverse psychology, or what?" The three of us were seated around an ornately engraved Ming Dynasty table in an office lined with glass-fronted display cases filled with antique china and bric-a-brac.

"My daughter doesn't like foreign devils," Isobel said, "Americans in particular."

"But you're an American."

"Not to Holuan. And in any case I'm a Nationalist Chinese citizen," Isobel said, "have been since the Company gave me the boot for getting pregnant. And that's the last free tidbit of in-

formation you get. I'm a busy woman, gentlemen, what can I do for you?"

I glanced inquiringly at Harry, and he nodded. "A couple of months ago you helped Mr. Liang with an—import problem," I said. "We're interested in the same service."

"Not interested. I don't deal dope."

"We'll, ah, we'll be moving the same merchandise Liang did."

"Still not interested. I don't want anything—"

"I don't think you quite understand," Harry interrupted. "I'm not *asking* for your cooperation, Isobel. You know who I am, and who I represent. You don't have a choice."

"Are you threatening me, Blondie?" Isobel smiled, a feral, yellow-fanged grin. "With what? I'm already a cripple. Finishing me off would be a kindness."

"There's always your daughter," Harry said. "She's not much, but I imagine you're fond of her, *duibudui*?"

The old woman stiffened, eyes glittering. "You—don't seem to have learned any manners from your tong brothers," she said slowly. "Families are off limits. It's just not done."

"I'm not Chinese."

"I noticed. All right, Blondie, you've made your point. Perhaps we can—work something out. There are a number of

ways to move contraband. How many people do you have?"

"Two," Harry said. "The two you're looking at."

"Only two?" Isobel frowned. "But you should—? Ahh, I think I see. Doing a bit of grandstanding, are we, Blondie? Impressing the in-laws?"

"That's none of your business. Can you handle the job or not?"

"Possibly. Can you get access to an auto-carrier cargo ship in say, Hong Kong? Or Manila?"

"I have access to ships in any port you could name, Petrie, and some you've never heard of. Why?"

"If you don't want to risk carrying the stones yourself, you narrow your options. Because of political tension here, the police X-ray or spot-search everyone and everything that comes into the country at port of entry. With one exception: automobiles purchased by the Nationalist government. They're unloaded at a guarded compound at Chilung harbor, but they're not searched thoroughly until they reach the customs garages in Taipei. The trick is to recover the goods before they get there." She rose stiffly, limped over to a rolltop desk, and retrieved a slender box, tossing it to me as she eased back into her chair. The label said Star-Hopper Starship. I opened it. It was a cheap

toy rocketship, a foot or so long, complete with Oriental astronauts looking through its painted portholes.

"Play with it if you like," she grinned. "It's appropriate for ages six through eleven. Just your speed."

Her dry chuckle deteriorated into a wrenching cough that nearly shook her to pieces. "Go on, damn it," she gasped, "take it apart."

The spaceship contained a miniature version of itself, a hollow, bullet-tipped cone, seven inches long, made of rigid metal mesh.

"The cone is operated by remote control. You slide it up the exhaust pipe, trigger it, and three legs snap out from its base to hold it in place. The car will operate normally, and the unit's undetectable. Somewhere between Chilung and Taipei you trigger it again, the legs retract, the cone is expelled, and you pick it up. Simple as that."

"Why mesh?" Harry asked. "Can the stones be damaged?"

"Mesh allows the exhaust to flow without much interference. The gems may get a bit dusty, but that's all. Exhaust temperature is only three or four hundred degrees, and diamonds are impervious to anything under a thousand. Liang used the system several times without problems. I'd suggest

you plant it in a limousine. Easier to spot."

"You said it's triggered remotely?"

"Either from the side of the road or a chase car. We've done it both ways. I have other systems available, but they all require using a team of at least four—"

"No," Harry said, cutting her off, "I think this will do. How much?"

"Ten thousand U.S., and your promise that I'll never see you again."

"Done. I'm not carrying that much cash . . ."

"You can take the spaceship. I'll deliver the remote control unit when I have cash in hand. And now if you *gentlemen*, and I use the term loosely, will excuse me, I find all this skulduggery a bit tiring."

"Fair enough," Harry said, rising, "but remember that if anything goes wrong, Isobel, there's not a place on this planet where my people can't find you. Or your daughter."

"They won't have to look very hard, Blondie, Taipei is my home. I'll be right here. Now take your toy and get out."

"You're awfully quiet," Harry observed in the taxi afterwards. "Something on your mind?"

"Not really. Just thinking that Saigon was a long time ago. There was a war on and we

did a few things I'm not proud of. But I don't recall threatening any little old ladies."

"Mind games," Harry said blandly, "no harm done, right? We needed her cooperation and we got it."

"I guess," I sighed. "So now what? Do you want me to check my computer and see if anybody's gotten a permit to import a limo?"

"I've got a better idea. You import one. That way we'll know arrival dates, times, the works."

"It's not that simple. Limousines are reserved for government officials. I'd have to sell one first, and the paperwork—"

"Just give me the name of the man in charge of purchasing. I'll do the rest."

"You've got that kind of pull?"

"Try me. Oh, and one other thing." He slid a sheaf of greenbacks out of his vestpocket and counted out a thousand dollars. "Here's a down payment on your fee, Charlie. Do us both a favor and blow some of it on a new suit. That rag you're wearing is so far over the hill I'm embarrassed to be seen with you."

"Yeah," I said evenly, "I know the feeling."

Lancaster was as good as his word. The next day I got a call from a government purchasing agent who'd been ducking me for

months. He was *very* cordial, and while he didn't exactly grovel, he clearly thought I'd acquired influence of some sort. We had a friendly ten-minute chat, and he ordered a stretched Caddy loaded with options at forty-five grand plus. Under other circumstances, I would have been turning cartwheels, but I kept hearing a faint ringing in my ears. Like the clang of cell doors. I called Harry, gave him the car's serial number and the address of the customs warehouse where it was stored in Hong Kong. He said okay. Not thanks, or nice job. Or squat else. Okay.

In due course I received cables telling me the car had been shipped via the freighter *Otoya Maru*, Hong Kong to Taiwan, and would be unloaded at Chilung harbor ten days later, on the fifteenth, which in terms of far eastern freight, was speed equivalent to the Concorde. Harry again, unless I missed my guess.

The afternoon of the fifteenth I borrowed a used Buick off the lot and picked up Harry at his hotel. The trip to Chilung is usually under an hour, but as we approached the city, traffic slowed and clotted. The freight handling facilities are state-of-the-art on the docks, but the harbor's encircled by a sprawling seaport that was founded a thousand years before Car-

thage and is still under construction. Back in the sixties Robert Wise filmed *The Sand Pebbles* here, and got enough footage to fake most of 1920's mainland China without leaving the city limits.

Near the docks the narrow streets were jammed with taxis, cargo vans, pushcarts, and peddlers, hawking everything from powdered rhino horn to autographed glossies of Richard Attenborough. The dense Taiwanese/Chinese pedestrian crush was liberally seasoned with uniformed seamen from Poland and Panama, joined at the hip to sloe-eyed women in spike heels and rainbow splashed polyester mandarin sheaths, slit to the thigh.

I doubleparked the Buick in the street in front of the customs office. "Circle the block if a cop comes along," I said, climbing out, "I'll check upstairs to see when they start unloading." But I never made it. The window on the first floor landing offers a panoramic view of the harbor, including the customs compound. The gates were opening to let a convoy through, four new Toyota lorries, a half dozen camou-painted Land Rovers, and a pair of Chrysler Le Barons, with military police motorcycle escorts front and rear to ensure security in transit to the customs inspection sheds in Taipei. And at the end of the

column, just ahead of the rear guard, a stately, gleaming black Cadillac stretch-limousine. I froze, staring, stunned. Then I whirled and bolted back down the stairway, taking the steps four at a time, sprinted to the car and scrambled in.

"Somebody screwed up," I panted, "they're already rolling and we're on the wrong side of the harbor. We've got to get back to the freeway. Move it!"

Harry punched the pedal, laying rubber for half a block, threading the Buick through the mid-afternoon jam like a dirt track racer. It was hopeless. By hitting the horn instead of the brakes and ignoring a couple of fender-benders and an upended pushcart, we managed to shave all of a minute and a half from our travel time through the city. When we hit the freeway the convoy was nowhere in sight.

Even pedal to the metal, with Harry cursing the Buick and making cat's-whisker lane changes at bowel-voiding speed, we were only a few kilometers from Taipei when we finally spotted the column, motoring briskly along in the right lane.

Harry tossed a plastic box the size of a cigarette pack on the seat. "How far are we from the customs garages?"

"Three minutes, maybe," I said, "no more."

"Okay. I'm going to squeeze

into the column behind the limo. You hit the tab on the controller and try to spot the cone when it releases."

"You can't cut into a convoy, it's illegal and they've got a police escort. Pull alongside and blow your horn to distract 'em. It's our only shot."

Harry tried to swing the Buick out to pass, but the lanes were jammed and we couldn't get by. The column began slowing as they approached their exit. Harry leaned frantically on the horn. The rear motorcycle escort dropped back a little, swiveled in his saddle and waved us off. I smiled and waved back. He unsnapped the flap of his shoulder holster, and pointedly slapped the butt of his weapon. Still grinning like a moron, I punched the button on the remote control, and caught a momentary glimpse of a small black cone bouncing along the shoulder of the road.

"We've got it," I said, waving a cheery aloha to the cycle cop. "Slow down and pull over."

Harry eased the Buick to a halt on the gravel shoulder. The cone was in plain view a half dozen car lengths behind us, but Harry grabbed my wrist before I could get out. "Sweet Jesus," he said softly, "that cop's coming back."

The rearguard motorcyclist had cut across the highway and was motoring slowly toward us

on the opposite shoulder, looking us over as he approached. He hesitated, waiting for a break in traffic, then gunned his machine across to our side of the road, nearly crushing the container beneath his wheels.

He rumbled up alongside my door, and motioned for me to roll my window down, a squat, Yuan Dynasty horseman from the Golden Horde, in polarized sunglasses. We eyed each other a moment, across a thousand years of culture gap. He bridged it by leaning forward and deliberately hawking a gob of phlegm on my lapel. I swallowed hard, and pretended not to notice. He paused a beat to see if I felt lucky. Then did a brief, snide impression of my smiling and waving act, and waited for my reaction again. Harry's hand was still clamped on my wrist, numbing it. I maintained my cool, a study in *savoir faire*, with a yellow-gray oyster slithering down my new suit. The cop grunted, flipped us a mock salute, then gunned his machine back onto the highway, spraying the Buick with gravel as he roared off after the convoy. Harry and I bolted out of the Buick the second the cop was out of sight.

Harry got to the container first. He picked it up reverently and brushed it off. It was a bit battered and dusty, from bouncing along the roadside, but it

was intact. And it was empty.

He frowned at it for a moment, and then shook it gently, as though somehow the diamonds might materialize. He raised his eyes to mine. Pools of murder. "Isobel," he said, "is dead meat."

“You’ve got to be wrong,” I said, as he cautiously piloted the Buick through the Syimending commercial district’s late afternoon rush hour, “she can hardly walk, and she had no way of knowing which ship or car we used.”

“She knew who I was, and who you were. She’s sharper than she looks. Too sharp, maybe. To stay healthy.”

“But she’s not physically capable of pulling it off.”

“So she had help,” he said indifferently. “It doesn’t matter. She’ll tell me all about it.”

“The way I see it, it had to be somebody from the ship.”

“The *Otoya Maru*’s a tong ship, Charlie, owned by the family. Only the captain knew what was going down, and we sealed the cargo crate. No one could have broken into it without his knowing about it.”

“Why not the captain himself, then? It’s his word against yours that the diamonds were ever there.”

“You don’t get it, do you? You think when four million bucks

of tong money takes a hike they hold a goddamn board of inquiry? They just eliminate everyone involved, right down the line. It's more efficient. If we don't find those diamonds, that captain's as dead as we are."

"I ah—see. You know, I don't seem to recall your mentioning that part of it when you cut me into this for a lousy three grand and a passport."

"Didn't I?" he grunted. "Must've slipped my mind."

We parked the Buick in an alley a few blocks from the Jade Mountain Shop. The mercury vapor street lamps were beginning to flicker on, pale amber halos glowing in the evening haze as we quietly made our way through the nearly deserted streets.

It was after closing time, and the shop was as dark as its neighbors. The doors were locked, no sign of life inside. Harry coolly scanned the street for witnesses, then reared back and kicked the door hard at the latch, splintering the wood around it, banging it open. We stepped quickly into the shop and jammed the door closed behind us.

The place appeared to be deserted, silent as a photograph, and yet I felt distinctly uneasy, fingernails rasping across the blackboard of my nerves. Com-

bat jitters maybe. Or maybe a psychic whisper from a mouldering shrunken head.

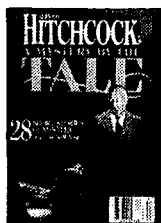
Harry eased an ugly little Bauer .25 automatic out of his jacket as we moved warily down the aisle toward the office at the rear. At his nod, I grasped the doorknob. He flattened himself against the adjacent wall, weapon ready. I yanked the door open, Harry hesitated three beats, then bolted through the doorway and dropped into a combat crouch, covering the room. Isobel Petrie was seated at the small, ornately carved conference table, doing the *China Post* crossword, sipping tea from a Sung dynasty cup. She eyed Harry and his automatic for a moment, glanced at me, and shook her head.

"You might try knocking," she sighed, laying the newspaper aside, and calmly filling the teacups of two place settings already arranged on the table. "I'm a bit lame but I can still answer the door. You're late. I expected you an hour ago. Tea?"

Harry stalked to the table in two strides and cleared it with a sweep of his arm, trashing the antique tea service on the hardwood floor. "Two seconds, Isobel," he hissed, "two seconds to tell me where they are, or you're going to find out what crippled really means."

"Easy, Harry," I said, grasping his arm, "don't—" He jerked

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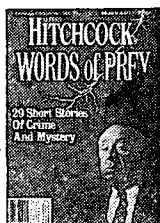


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free, jammed his elbow back into my diaphragm, and hammered me across the temple with the gun butt, driving me to my knees.

"Stay out of this, Marks, or you're next. I haven't forgotten who brought me here." He pulled the empty wire-mesh cone out of his jacket pocket and tossed it on the table. "Time's up, Petrie. Where are they?"

"I don't know," she said carefully, "at least, not exactly."

"Damn it, don't jerk me around! You think I'm playing games?" He whirled and smashed his forearm into a glass-fronted china display case, shredding his sleeve, scattering crockery shards all over the room. Isobel flinched, but didn't waver. I stayed on my knees, swaying, clutching the table, fighting to bring the shimmering room into focus. And glimpsed a movement, in the corner, something . . .

"Last chance, Isobel," Harry panted, blood dripping from his sleeve to the littered table. "I won't ask you again. Where are they?"

"I'll have to—show you," she said, her eyes locked on his, "they're in—a book. On the shelf behind me."

"Get it," Harry said, "but nothing sudden, understand?"

She half turned, cautiously retrieved the book, and placed it on the table, a thick paper-

bound manual. She flipped it open to a place marked with an envelope, and pushed it toward Harry. And the shadow in the corner of the room moved again. A narrow door. Easing open, a millimeter at a time.

"What the hell is this?" Harry said.

"A shop manual," Isobel said, "for Cadillacs. You want to know where your diamonds are? Read it."

"No. You tell me, Isobel. Now!"

"They're gone," she said, taking a deep breath, "back to where they came from." The door opened a hair farther and stopped. I could see a vague silhouette in the darkness beyond, barely discernible, terribly familiar. Weapon. AK 47.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Harry snapped.

"Drugs, Blondie, Burma horse. That's where your diamonds came from, and that's what they are now. White powder. Limousines are equipped with catalytic converters, a kind of—afterburner. It reduces pollutants by reburning the exhaust fumes. In the tailpipe. At eighteen hundred degrees. And diamonds crystallize at any temperature over a thousand. And disintegrate. Powder."

Harry stared at her a moment, stunned, disbelieving. Then frantically scanned the manual on the table. I tried to get to my feet, but the room

tilted on its axis and I didn't make it. My head was humming and the walls were fluid, flowing. Only the shadow in the doorway held firm.

"Harry," I mumbled. My voice was barely a croak.

"My God," Lancaster said, straightening slowly, his face ashen, bloodless, "you crazy bitch. Do you understand what you've done? You've committed suicide."

"Maybe. But I served in Vietnam, too, Blondie," she said, every syllable etched in ice. "I know all about heroin, saw the wreckage firsthand. Taiwan is my *home*. These are my people. Tell the tong to take their junk business somewhere else."

"But they'll kill you for this," Harry said, "they'll waste all of us."

"Perhaps not," Isobel said carefully, "not if you're half as clever as you think you are." She pushed the envelope book-mark toward him. "Since my, ah, product didn't perform exactly as advertised, I'm giving you your money back, Blondie. Double your money back, in fact. Twenty thousand U.S. Take it. And run. It's your only chance. And ours."

"Run?" Harry echoed.

"If you tell your bosses what happened, they won't believe you. At first. They'll try to force another explanation out of you, with methods you'd know bet-

ter than I. But in the end they'll kill you. Unless you run. You'll find new papers in the envelope, Blondie, passport, everything. I'd suggest you get started, the sooner the better."

"Run," Harry repeated softly, picking up the envelope, "just like that? And leave you in one piece? After what you've done to me?"

"If you kill me," Isobel said calmly, "you'll blow your only chance to escape. The authorities will seal the airports for a day, maybe two, long enough for the tong to find you, perhaps, even if the police don't. It's a poor risk, Blondie. I'm not worth it."

"You're wrong, Isobel," Harry said, eyeing his weapon, "I think it might be—"

I hammered a forearm across the back of his knees, buckling them, sweeping his feet from beneath him, and I put everything I had left into one wobbly punch that caught him flush on the jaw as he fell. He hit the hardwood floor like a sack of cement, twitched once, and that was it. Lights out. I took a long, ragged breath, and managed to stagger to my feet.

"Nice work," Isobel said. "I suppose I should thank you."

"Don't bother," I said, "I didn't do it for you."

The door at the far end of the room opened and Isobel's daughter stepped through,

holding an AK 47 assault rifle, very professionally centered on my chest. "Pick up your friend," she said coldly, "and get out. And don't ever come back."

"Yes, ma'am," I sighed, "anything you say."

After twenty minutes or so, Harry moaned and opened one eye. "What . . . ?"

"I tried to carry you," I said, "but I fell. A couple of times. We're in the gutter, Harry."

"So I see," he said slowly, glancing around, blinking, "home at last. What ah—what the hell happened?"

"You were about to get your head blown off. I hit you."

"Mmmm," he said, wincing as he gingerly fingered his swollen jaw. Neither of us spoke for a while. An elderly Taiwanese gent in a business suit glanced at us curiously as he strolled past, then quickened his pace.

"You knew she was setting me up, didn't you?" Harry said at last. "You had to."

"Yeah," I admitted. "I knew. We doublechecked everything the first time Liang used the system. It works fine in an ordinary car. In a limo? Poof."

"I don't understand," he said softly. "How could you do it to me, Charlie? We were friends."

"Yes, we were. You were maybe the best friend I ever had, and I've missed you, all these years. And you know something, I still miss the Harry Lancaster I knew. If you ever bump into that guy, tell him to look me up. I'll buy him a beer."

"Maybe I'll do that," he said, getting slowly to his feet; "but it ain't likely. Four million bucks up the flue. Four million. Jesus H. Christ." He grinned, shaking his head, and for just a moment, I caught a glimpse of the man I'd known in Saigon, a lifetime ago. But Harry wasn't that man. He was a ghost. As we're all ghosts of who we were, or wanted to be. "I suppose I ought to kill you for this," he said. "Or something."

"You don't want to do that. We'd both feel lousy about it no matter how it came out. But you'd probably better get going. Take care of yourself, Harry. Luck."

He stared down at me for a moment, started to say something, but didn't. He just shrugged and walked unsteadily off down the littered street. And he didn't look back. I sat on the curb, watching him fade into memory. And I could see his blond hair gleaming ghostly in the dusk, long after the rest of him had disappeared.

FICTION

Special Effects

by Allen Simpson



“Oh dear,” sighed Mrs. Newman, contemplating the body slumped at her piano, “this is going to be very difficult.”

Violence as such did not disturb her. After all, she had been a nurse in the Second World War, so she was familiar with most of the dreadful things one human being can do to another. But the body at her piano was something else, something she was going to be hard put to account for in such a way as to avoid unpleasantness and possibly even a prison term. Not, perhaps, a long prison term, considering her age, but these things are relative: what might seem a light sentence to a young thug with many years of violence to look forward to, would surely seem—and might be—forever to an elderly woman, especially to an innocent elderly woman.

Mrs. Newman could see at a glance that she would be the prime

Illustration by Ron Chironna

suspect, for the body was that of Mr. O'Malley, and Mr. O'Malley had a key to her apartment. This was because—in a generous, if somewhat reckless, moment—she had given him a spare key so he could come across the hall and play her piano whenever she was out. She spent as little time in her apartment as she could, rarely played the piano any more, and Mr. O'Malley missed the piano he had once owned. His wife had insisted he get rid of it when they sold their home.

Mrs. Newman should have known better, of course. The building, a high-rise for retired people, was a hive of snoops and gossips. When they had found out that Mr. O'Malley possessed a key to her apartment, they could imagine only one explanation for it.

But she had felt sorry for the poor man. His wife had a voice that could remove plaque from teeth, and she used it frequently to remind him that she thought marrying him had been the greatest mistake of her life. Mrs. O'Malley was fifteen years her husband's junior.

"I'll be dead soon," he had told her a few days before, "and then you'll have plenty of money." He had sounded to Mrs. Newman as if he expected to win on that deal.

A quick survey of her apartment told Mrs. Newman that it must have been Mrs. O'Malley who had killed her husband, for nothing was missing and there were no signs of a break-in. No doubt she had accompanied him into the apartment and, as he played the piano, dispatched him with the piece of abstract sculpture Zeke, Mrs. Newman's grandson, had given her for her birthday the last time he had remembered it, several years before. He had made it himself, back when he was trying to find himself through sculpture. It annoyed Mrs. Newman that Mrs. O'Malley would not only attempt to frame her for her husband's murder, but use one of Zeke's rare birthday presents for the purpose. Mrs. Newman did not like the sculpture very much, but she displayed it loyally, dusted it often, and felt that it was the thought that counted.

She made herself a cup of tea and considered her dilemma.

Today was her birthday. She was having some of "the girls"—as they called themselves—in for a little party that afternoon, plus Mr. O'Malley. But, of course, Mr. O'Malley wouldn't be coming now, she thought as she sipped her tea. Then, with a start, she realized that there wasn't going to be a party. She would be spending her seventieth birthday in jail.

She glanced into the living room to see if maybe it had all been her imagination. But Mr. O'Malley was still there, slumped over

the piano as if negotiating a particularly emotional passage, and Zeke's sculpture was still on the floor at his feet, much less the worse for wear than Mr. O'Malley. *Ars longa, vita brevis*, she thought morosely.

An idea struck her. She reached for the telephone and called her grandson. Zeke, she knew, would still be in bed, for it was not yet noon and creativity exacts a severe toll.

Soon after dropping out of college, Zeke (whose real name was Bernard) had decided to devote his life to finding himself. This seemed to involve doing to his body many of the things that boys of an earlier generation had done to their cars, to alter the way they looked and performed when they came from their makers. It also involved a testing of the limits of art in ways Mrs. Newman only dimly grasped, although she made an effort. A few years ago it had been abstract sculpture; this year, film and video.

When he answered the phone, Mrs. Newman asked Zeke to come over at once, to help her with a problem that had arisen in connection with her birthday party. He came, for beneath his jarringly post-modern exterior there lurked a good boy. When he had taken in Mr. O'Malley at the piano and the impact his art had made on him, he whistled under his breath and gave his grandmother a look of genuine admiration. "You did this?" he asked.

Mrs. O'Malley said, for perhaps the tenth time, "I just don't know where Wally could be!" Since entering Mrs. Newman's apartment, she had found it difficult to hide her bewilderment. Until they moved to the dining room, her eyes kept darting to the piano and the piece of sculpture sitting on the table next to it. "Are you *sure* you haven't seen him, Florence?" she asked Mrs. Newman. "He said he was coming over to play the piano. That was hours ago."

"If he was here," Mrs. Newman said, "he left before I got home from my morning walk."

They sat down to the ice cream and cake and Mrs. Newman was just pouring coffee when suddenly the lights went out. Because the drapes were drawn, the apartment was plunged into deep gloom.

Piano music came softly from the living room, one of the more dismal of the Chopin nocturnes that Mr. O'Malley had favored.

"Why, it's your husband!" one of the ladies said. "It must be a surprise for Florence!"

"How sweet!" Mrs. Newman exclaimed, beaming at Mrs. O'Malley.

"No!" Mrs. O'Malley said, her voice rising, and when it reached its upper limit she said it again. "No!" She stood up, her chair

crashing to the floor behind her, her coffee cup falling from her hand.

She rushed to the living room door, threw it open, and stood there staring. The others followed, crowding into the doorway. Mr. O'Malley was sitting at the piano, swaying in time to the music, his hands floating up and down the keyboard. His touch had always been delicate, which made listening to him a joy.

"You're dead!" Mrs. Newman shouted, taking a step into the room. "You're dead, I tell you! *I killed you!*" Mr. O'Malley turned and stared over his shoulder at his wife. He seemed to be grinning, he almost seemed to wink and, Mrs. Newman thought, he had never looked happier. Behind the drapes, lightning flashed and there was a sudden clap of thunder and Mrs. O'Malley fainted, of course.

"You're quite disgusting," Mrs. Newman told her grandson and his friends, after the police had taken the O'Malleys to their separate destinations. She tried to hide her admiration, for she knew that it was important to the boys to be thought disgusting. "The part where you had him grinning and winking over his shoulder—that was truly tasteless! How'd you manage it?"

"Wires, of course, and a black light on the opposite wall that flickered on the stiff's face," one of Zeke's friends said. He sounded bored. Mrs. Newman seemed to recall that he was involved in making a half-hour video on the meaning of life.

All three boys were feeding cake and ice cream into their faces. There was plenty, for the party had not been a great success, at least not in any traditional sense. Her grandson had collected a couple of his friends who were also involved in finding themselves with the aid of the latest in Japanese technology and they had come over and arranged things. They had lurked in the bedroom, Mr. O'Malley wired and ready, and waited for the ladies to go into the dining room and for Mrs. Newman to close the door after them. A cassette in one of those big stereo boom boxes had provided the piano music. No big deal, but they wished she'd given them more time, so they could really have put themselves into it.

"Wires, strobes, black lights, and lightning and thunder behind the drapes—you don't think you overdid it just a little, do you, boys?" Mrs. Newman asked them.

"Nah," Zeke said, his mouth full of angel food cake, "a corpse and a killer just ain't enough any more. These days, you gotta have special effects."

(continued from page 2)

up to twenty years. Same for solicitation to commit murder, and for aiding and abetting other relatives who might have thought of it first. First degree murder, in case that was the original reason for your trip, could get you life imprisonment, or maybe even the chair.

And while you're at Cousin Delia Mae's raucous holiday shindig, keep in mind that it's a particular offense to distribute controlled substances to individuals younger than twenty-one years, or to pregnant women.

If Cousin Ted seems to have figured out that you don't like him, and you decide to switch to subtler tactics to get revenge, remember that tampering with consumer products with the intent to injure or kill could get you four years or more.

One thing you can count on—once the holidays are over,

the bills will come pouring in. If you're planning on blackmailing Cousin Delia Mae over that little incident at the holiday shindig to improve your cash flow, think carefully: you could get up to a year—even if you asked for less than two thousand dollars and didn't threaten her—or more, depending on how greedy you were and how many vile threats you made. For that price, it's hardly worth it.

And if you plan to sell the family car, keep in mind that you could get up to six months for tampering with the odometer, if it's your first offense.

If you want to know more, read the *1988 Federal Sentencing Guidelines Manual*, by the United States Sentencing Commission. It's published annually, by West Publishing Co., in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Or just try to get in the spirit of things.



FICTION

Killer in the House

by
Jas. R.
Petrin

“You will be all right, won't you, Nanny?”
*'Course I will. Go out, and have fun, and leave me
at home with a killer!*

Nanny sat in her wheelchair, silent, angry, swathed in her blanket, watching her granddaughter Gwen fuss in and out of the bathroom, the bedroom, putting on her clothes, her scent, and her face, while her husband Will leaned his head in at the door and called

with annoyance, "The car's warmed up and running, the Arabs are getting rich, are we going to the damn restaurant or not?"

"I'm *coming*, can't you give me a minute's peace? I've only got to put on my coat and see if Nanny needs anything."

Gwen came stumping across the living room, shaking the floor, and bent over Nanny. She smelled like a harlot's picnic. She was a good girl, though, Gwen was, more considerate of Nanny than her sister Liz had ever been. Considerate and caring, but none too bright. She was a stupid, and so was her husband. They were both stupid.

"Nanny," Gwen whispered, "we're leaving now. You know I'll worry about you the whole time we're gone. We may go to a movie after din-din, we may not. I don't know. But if we're late, you mustn't worry. Louie will be along. I made him promise to skip the bar at the Red Lantern tonight, to come home early and fix your dinner. So you'll only be alone for an hour or so. Now tell me, darling, if there's anything you want before we go."

She was studying Nanny's lips, and Nanny's eyes swam from the scent of her perfume.

There's lots I want, Nanny thought. I want you to stay right here and not charge off and leave me alone with that murdering Louie, and I want Will to go on out to that freezer Louie brought here with him when he moved in and crowbar that lock open and get your frozen-stiff sister Liz out of it and thaw her out and bury her proper and Christian, and I want Louie dragged out of here by a policeman, kicking, and a rope got around him, and him hung up high until he's dead, dead, dead!

But when a stroke comes along and hits you like a runaway wagon the way it had Nanny last fall, you were lucky if you could still draw breath.

She could feel Gwen's eyes on her face. Out in the driveway Will was revving up the Dodge like he was part of a getaway. Which maybe he was. A getaway from Nanny.

Nanny struggled to shape the words on her lips.

Killer, she mouthed, in the house! Look . . . the freezer!

Gwen straightened, puffing out her fat cheeks and laughing.

"Oh, Nanny, don't start up with *that* again."

"Don't start up with what?" It was Will poking his head in on a blast of winter air.

"I think she's going on about Louie's freezer again. You know how it upsets her. She thinks he's got Lizzie Mae's body inside it."

I wish you'd make him open it and give Nanny a look inside so as to set her mind at rest."

Will sighed a long weary breath and rolled his eyes in his best God-give-me-strength expression.

"Look. You know I talked to Louie, and you know I explained it all to Nanny a dozen times. He keeps the freezer locked so those kids you babysit don't go trapping themselves in it and suffocating; he keeps it running so it doesn't get to smelling all skunky inside; and she doesn't need to look in it anyways because, like I told her another dozen times, me and Louie seen Liz at the mall. I seen her myself with my own two eyes, walking large as life through the Easton Mall. Now if all that don't satisfy her, nothing will. Can we go now?"

Gwen's eyes flashed with sudden annoyance.

"I wish you'd stop talking in front of Nanny like she wasn't even here. It wouldn't hurt Louie to let her have a little peek. It wouldn't hurt anybody one bit." She bent over Nanny again, with a look of concern. "There's nothing for you to worry about, darling, everything's fine. You'll see."

She kissed Nanny's forehead—lightly, so as not to smear her lipstick.

Then the big door banged and they were gone.

Nanny would have stamped her foot in frustration if it were possible. Nothing to worry about!

Everything's fine, is it? But you haven't seen Louie kneeling by his freezer, reaching down into it and speaking softly and crying. No you haven't, have you?

Leaving her alone with a killer! Did they think Nanny shouldn't have fears, simply because her welfare was entirely in their hands? Neither of them had ever awakened in the night with eyes stretched wide as sealer rings, sweating, wanting to scream, run, turn over and cry out to someone, but only able to lie there with one's body wrapped around one like a steel clamp and silently shriek into the dark.

A killer in the house!

Being paralyzed, she'd learned fear, all right. Fear such as she'd never known before in her life. Fear of fire. Fear of being at the mercy of some cruel person—like a killer.

And even, because it was always present, the fear of falling.

Except for the killer, that was the worst. Even sitting quietly here at home in her chair held a terror that made her head reel. Falling out of her chair was a horrifying notion. The nightmare

of it woke her every night. The slow weightless launch into space and the floor hurtling up to smash her. It was the old childhood dream of falling, falling, falling, and not being able to raise an arm to save yourself. She shuddered.

And now they'd invited a killer to stay.

Louie.

With his freezer.

The cold they'd let in was making the oil stove groan; it whirled its fan in the corner and creaked its joints at her. She wished she had thought to ask Gwen to turn it up a notch or two; she wished she could just reach out herself and give the dial a damn good twist.

But she'd have to lift her arm to do that, and it was all she could do to lift her fingers. She lifted a finger now to the little control wand on her chair, and the motor hummed and crept her across the kitchen. It hesitated before it went; the switch wanted cleaning again. She stopped a few feet from the stove and let the heat soak into her.

Her eyes were still bleary from that horrid perfume Gwen had been wafting around. She blinked once, twice to clear them; it was an awful thing to be unable to rub your eyes when you wanted to. Her eyesight had always been good. She could read the chrome letters on the stove that spelled CHAMPION, she could read the spine of the telephone book on the stand by the back doorway, she could read the name ARCTIC through the partly opened door on the . . .

FREEZER!

It was visible there in the open doorway, hulking, one hard angular white shoulder in the dark.

Louie's freezer.

The one with Lizzie Mae's body locked inside it like a frozen pork roast.

Damn it, Gwen, you could at least have thought to close that door before you went off to enjoy yourself. Nanny moved her finger to hum the motor to turn the wheelchair away and not look.

And Louie saying he had seen Liz at the mall. What rubbish. Did he think he could fool Nanny with a comment like that? Liz couldn't be in two places at the same time and she sure as heck hadn't clambered out of that freezer, what with its being locked and all, and her lying at the bottom of it stabbed or shot or strangled, with a glaze of ice over her and her lips all blue. And Will, who had backed Louie up, had only caught a glimpse from the barbershop window where he had sat breathing with the rest of

the men, all of them lathered up like mad dogs, watching the women's legs go by. It wasn't as if he'd actually *spoken* to her.

But Will, listening to Louie, thought he'd seen Liz, and so neither he nor Gwen would consider the real truth. They weren't surprised at Liz's staying away; it was just like her to cut them out. They assigned no blame for the marriage breakup, and they let Louie go smiling on. They liked him. Thought he was the cat's whiskers. It was only Nanny who had seen him, when Gwen and Will were gone for groceries and he thought she was asleep, kneeling over that open freezer like a monk, bowing and talking into the frost and sobbing.

Louie was a clothing salesman, or had been. Best in the business, he liked to brag. He'd made his managers jealous, on account of, with his commissions, he made more money than they did. Or so he said.

Nanny had never warmed to him.

She hadn't liked him from the day three years ago when Liz had waltzed him in the door, hanging all over him, announcing to a shocked silence that she was marrying him the very next day. Liz had always been impulsive like that. Taking up with any half-cracked lunatic that came smiling out of the sun. She'd found three husbands that way before Louie came along, and though all three of them had been stupids, Louie had been the only one who had struck Nanny as being totally . . .

BAD!

So Nanny had done some phoning—she wasn't all seized up then—and found out some very curious things from her friend Emma Parker in Youngerville. *They'd* had a fellow just like Louie working in their clothing store—Casey's on Third Street—and he had been simply the *strangest* man! Folks had seen him on warm evenings, parked on Lover's Lookout—which was the hill over the river where the young folks liked to go—and he had a different girl with him every single time. One night a blonde, next night a red-head—always somebody different. The gossip had gone round about it, and the next thing anybody knew, he'd got the sack from Casey's and had left town. Folks had pried away at Casey with crowbars for weeks, but he wouldn't say a word about it. Said he wouldn't bring disgrace on his store.

That same night, after the phone call, Nanny had waked up screaming because she had looked on death in a dream. And the next few times she saw Louie, she saw death following one step

behind him, or peeking around him, or standing next to him and holding his arm like a bride. That dream was prophetic.

He'd killed Liz, all right. Nanny had seen it coming from the first. And now here was the proof, if anybody would bother to look. In the back room. Under lock and key. In the freezer.

Of course she'd tried to warn Liz, but Liz had only turned all huffy and cold and gone for her coat, wanting to leave right away. Then she'd begun staying away altogether, which was that Louie's doing for sure, whispering evil in her ear.

Right about then the stroke had hit Nanny, and that had been Louie's doing, too, just as sure as sheep dip. He'd hexed her. Who else had the evil to do it, after all?

Oh, Louie was trouble, all right, and nothing but. In the end, Nanny had been proved right.

Just take that night Liz had phoned. She must have been crying up a storm, Gwen was so sympathetic with her. And later Nanny had overheard Gwen telling Will about it:

"... lost his job at the store."

"How come?"

"She wouldn't say exactly. But they caught him redhanded at something . . . something pretty bad. Louie wouldn't talk about it, so she phoned the manager and he told her what it was. She was ashamed to tell me too much, but I think it was because he wouldn't leave the female customers alone. Liz said she'd always had her suspicions about that, and now she was going to leave him . . ."

So things hadn't worked out too well down at the clothing store. And after Louie's bragging how he'd been too good for all those other stores, too—he'd worked in half a dozen. It told Nanny a lot. He hadn't been victimized by jealous managers at all. It was just the old wandering fingers problem.

And suddenly Liz had stopped phoning. Just like that, no more calls. Very suspicious. Nobody saw hide nor hair of either one of them until Louie showed up at the door with his battered suitcase and his freezer. And wasn't *that* just the darnedest thing? A freezer! Most men would have brought their TV or their liquor cabinet, but here comes Louie with a freezer.

He'd explained with his easy smile that he and Liz had broken up, that Liz didn't want to be bothered with it, and he'd brought it because it was the only thing in the house they owned free and clear. And if anybody believed *that* story, they'd buy a raffle ticket with the World Trade Center as first prize.

He hadn't fooled Nanny. Not one bit.

And now here they were. All of them under the same roof. Liz in her frozen sleep; Gwen, foolish Gwen, suspecting nothing; Will, who liked having a man in the house to talk sports with; and Nanny in her chair.

And Louie.

Hating her. No, *despising* her!

He made no secret of *that*, either.

Only a week ago there had been just the two of them in the living room, watching TV, Louie seated on the end of the couch, cursing her under his breath. Oh, he was quiet and cute about it, speaking feather soft so that Gwen shouldn't hear in the kitchen, keeping his murdering hands in his lap, his murderous eyes on the television, barely moving his lips.

"Nanny, Nanny, Nanny, hard old Nanny, mean old Nanny, Nanny the witch." He'd gone on like that for twenty minutes. Oh, he was confident with her so seized up from the stroke he'd hexed on her.

Nanny closed her eyes, tried not to think of the freezer in the dark in the room behind the wall. After a while she rested.

What woke her was a thump at the door.

Somebody cursing, fumbling, laughing.

Louie was home, and tight as a tick. So he had stopped at the Lantern, after all. Nanny felt her pulse pick up a beat from somewhere, then settle itself again.

Louie was home.

Louie the killer.

And no Gwen.

Nanny waited in her chair by the stove, and at that moment the blower shut off, sighing to a stop and impressing her with the silence of the house when Louie wasn't around. Sober or drunk, he had a loud way about him. Too friendly when sober, laughing too harshly and smiling too broadly and always standing one step too close to you; and too stupid when drunk, playing the clown, telling rude jokes and mimicking famous people to turn those around him purple with laughter.

There was a crash from the steps outside, and a loud groan. A tinkle of broken glass.

He didn't fool Nanny, though.

Nanny could see the real Louie behind the smokescreen of jokes and laughter. She had known a lot of Louies in her time. He was

a type. The sort you got a glimpse of sometimes when a fresh wind gusted the smoke away, and you were always strangely shocked to see just what you'd expected, like a glimpse of hard white bone in a deep red wound.

You learned a thing or two in eighty-two years.

Now she heard the jangle of keys at the lock. Louie seemed in awful shape. He was fumbling around out there badly. Despite what Gwen had said, he must have started earlier than usual today down at the Lantern, and run into some generous friends, too.

Then the door crashed open, and there stood Louie, smiling.

"Hello—Nanny!"

He swayed in the doorway, more concerned with holding himself up than in shutting out winter with the door. He had brought two cases of beer home with him, one tucked up high under his arm, the other clutched tight in his fingers and now just a boxful of broken glass, dribbling suds and amber stains over Gwen's polished linoleum.

He made one false attempt, then another, and finally managed to set the two cases down, handling even the broken one gently, as if he hoped it held something that might yet be salvaged. He fumbled his parka off, dropped it by the fridge, and, finally sensing the chill from the open door, closed it hard by falling backwards against it.

"I said *hello*, Nanny!"

He rattled a chrome chair out from the table, arranged it with extraordinary precision, and then dropped into it, letting out one of the loudest belches Nanny had ever heard.

You wouldn't dare act like this if Gwen and Will were here. You're like every other drunk I've ever seen, with a kind of radar that lets you go on fooling certain people. All the rest, you don't want to fool. Them you want to impress with how nasty you can be. But I can see through you like a glass coffin lid, mister, see your grinning death's head face getting ready to pop out at me. Oh, I know you!

Nanny was feeling the heat of the stove now. She wanted to back away a little but was afraid to draw attention to herself. If she could somehow remain inconspicuous for the next while, maybe Gwen and Will would come crunching in out of the snow, shaking off the night and filling the room with loud talk about the movie. As Gwen had promised earlier, everything would be all right.

Louie fumbled in his shirt for cigarettes. He didn't notice that he'd already put them on the table. He gave up with a flourish of disgust, leaned forward and hooked the undamaged beer case with

his finger, dragged it to him across the floor. He popped the case open with one hand—even in his drunkenness it was a polished motion—opened a bottle, took a long swallow, then groped again and finally found a cigarette.

He looked at Nanny.

"S'how the hell are ya?"

Nanny found herself wondering how she could appease him, knowing in her heart at the same time that appeasement was not possible. And even if it was, there was little she could do in her condition.

"Come here, Nanny, an' have a beer."

Her fingers fluttered at the controller. She was afraid to try it, afraid not to.

"Come on, Nanny!"

He swayed up out of his seat, leaning towards her with a list to one side. Then he was at the back of her chair, gripping the handles, pushing her up to the table. He was not gentle; he collided her with a table leg.

He giggled.

"Sorrysorrysorry! I'm sorry, Nanny. Don't tell Gwen on me, Nanny."

He sat down and faced her. She could smell the stink on him now, the acrid smoky bar, the heavy overripe scent of beer. He had mussed his hair somehow and it jutted from one side of his head like a wig that had slipped. He sucked on his bottle, then his cigarette, and put his head on one side, questioningly.

"You like tellin' Gwen things about me, don't you, Nanny? Why d'you do it? Ain't I always been friendly to you, Nanny? Don't I try to ch—cheer you up? Huh?"

He studied her down the length of his cigarette with his careful drunken eyes. She didn't like it. There was a menace in his tone, a hardening towards her with those last few words.

"Tellin' Gwen madeup stories about me. Not nice, Nanny, not nice."

And I'll have even more to tell her after tonight, you pig.

"You never liked me, Nanny."

Darn right, I never liked you. I saw you for what you were the day Liz dragged you in here out of some barroom garbage can.

"You worked real hard, Nanny, turnin' Liz against me. Got what you wanted, too. Bust us up. Did a good job on us, Nanny, a real good wrecking job."

Not as good as I should have done. Or it'd be you out there in that freezer, and her in here talking to me.

Louie went to suck at his bottle, found it empty, and rapped it down hard on the table. He probed into the case at his feet and fished out two more bottles.

"Le's have a drink together, Nanny. An' a long talk. You and me should've had a long talk years ago. Here, this is for you—you like beer, dontcha?"

He pushed the bottle across the table. She wondered if in his drunkenness he had forgotten that she didn't have the use of her hands. He was watching her and smiling as if he were the most agreeable man God had ever put breath into. His head was propped up with the hand that held his cigarette clipped between two nicotine-stained fingers. He smoked steadily, taking a lungful, then regurgitating the smoke and dribbling it out of his mouth in curds of solid white, which he then swallowed up again. It was a wonder to Nanny that it didn't make him sick. Maybe it would yet.

"How come you doan like me, Nanny?"

Because you're evil.

"What's so wrong with me, anyway?"

You're a destroyer, a breaker-down of things, you're a killer.

"I tried t'make you like me, Nanny. Tried real hard for Liz. But you wouldn' let me, wouldn' give me a chance. An' Liz blamed me for that, Nanny. Me. S'at fair?"

Suddenly his heavy hand crashed down to make the table jump.

"You answer me!"

She flinched. He must have noticed.

Then he was calm again. Almost wheedling.

"Le's be friends, Nanny, okay? Le's be *good* friends. Bottoms up!" He drank, then watched her, waiting, blinking. He giggled. "Oops! Forgot, Nanny. Forgot your bum arm. Ole war wound, right? Here, lemme help you."

He picked up her bottle, loomed in at her, reaching, pressed it to her lips, tipped it forward. She took some of the bitter fluid into her mouth, gagged, and felt the rest of it splash down her chin, onto her blouse and her blanket.

Louie pulled the bottle away.

"Sorry, Nanny, sorrysorrysorry. *Sorry!* You doan drink fast, do you? You're a lady. A real lady." He frowned. "Liz was a real lady, too, jus' like her Nanny. Oh, I could have my pick of any girls, take 'em out any time I want. But Liz was special. Better than the

others. I loved her. Yup. You doan b'lieve that, do you?" His face clouded. "You *never* believe me, Nanny. Liz tole me once you said I was—a liar!"

Again he gave the table a heavy smack.

Nanny cringed inside at his Jekyll and Hyde transformations. From calm discussion to sudden rage. She found herself hating him with every atom of her being. She had always despised drunks, and she despised this one with a special passion. This was the drunk who had ruined the life of her granddaughter Liz. The drunk who had finally killed Liz in some intoxicated rage and sealed her up in a freezer. The hate made her paralysis even more intolerable. She wished she were once again a healthy woman who could leap up and strike at this disgusting brute; or a man, a strong man, who could take him by the neck and squeeze and squeeze . . .

I hate you oh how I hate you, you drunken pig. I'd do anything to punish you for what you did to my Liz. I hope there's ghosts, and I hope I'm one real soon because even ghosts can do more in this world than a paralyzed old woman, and I'll come back to you then, cold and cadaverous and moldering, and I'll put my rotting hands on you and—

"Wanna see Liz, Nanny?"

She blinked.

He was gulping curds of smoke again and watching her with a brewing anticipation. She wondered if she had heard him right.

"Wanna see her, Nanny, or not?" He cackled. "You're pleased t'hear that, arncha? I know what you been tellin' Gwen. Proves you were right, doan it? Proves they should've listened to you, Nanny. You knew best. You knew nobody could walk out on ole Louie." He emptied his beer down his throat, opened another one and scowled. "But later, Nanny. Yes, I think later. Then you can see her. Okay? Drink first. You'll need it. She ain't as pretty as she used to be."

He laughed. Again he pushed the bottle at her, forcing open her mouth, pouring in the beer until she choked. He yanked it away so roughly this time that he pulled her false teeth askew. "Ooops," he said, giggling. "Sorry!" And stuck his fingers into her mouth to set them right again.

Nanny sat and glared at him. How terrible impotence was. It gripped you like a constricting snake and crushed the dignity out of you.

"You know," Louie said, "I was dancin' down at the Lantern tonight. I like dancin'. So did Liz. How 'bout you? Wanna dance,

Nanny? Cut the old rug? Shake a tail feather?"

He was halfway to his feet when he fell back with a simpering grin.

"I fergot, Nanny. You doan dance so good now. Your legs doan work so hot." He took some beer, began laughing in the middle of a swallow, snorted it up his nose and coughed horribly.

He put his cigarette back in his mouth; it waggled as he spoke.

"An' your arms, too, huh, Nanny? An' your neck, an' your back, an' your feet, an' your hands—oh, you're in *awful* shape, aincha? Your whole damn bod is shot. If only you could wheel on down to the graveyard and dig yourself up a few spare parts, eh, Nanny?"

He collapsed in his chair, convulsed with laughter.

Go ahead. Laugh away. Laugh till you choke on your own rotten tongue. Then I'll do the laughing. In my mind. At your funeral while they're wheeling you down to the graveyard.

He tossed his head as if to shake the laughter away.

"I wanna dance. I'm a dancin' fool, Nanny! Me an' Liz use to dance alla time. You can do it, Nanny. I'll lead."

He pulled himself up by the edge of the table. Two bottles went crashing against the wall, scattering dark brown splinters of glass. He chortled. "Dead soldiers, Nanny." Then he had caught hold of the wheelchair from behind and was rolling her back and forth and around the room, and singing his own accompaniment.

It was a heavy chair, what with the battery and motor; he used it partly as a support for his lurching, unsteady body. Around and around he trundled her, hooting. She felt giddy. She closed her eyes; that was worse; she opened them again. The room ran liquidly around her in watercolors. The stove came and went, came and went. Louie howled in her ear. "ROUN' AN' ROUN' AN' ROUN' SHE GOES. WHERE SHE STOPS, NOBODY KNOWS . . ."

And he threw Nanny away.

The chair shot out and across, flying, soaring over the floor, through the room, and fetched slam-bang! into the stove.

The chimney pipes shuddered and dropped a dusting of soot. The stove jerked back three inches. Nanny felt herself lifted up, floating on and outward, the hot metal stove looming, halting, then receding again as she fell back into her chair, her nostrils filled with the stink of scorching steel.

She thanked God for Gwen's care in tucking her feet well back under the blanket. If not for that her toes would surely have been crushed.

She could not see Louie with her chair facing the stove. The heat

beat against her face and trembled the little grey hairs that stuck out over her eyes. Behind her Louie groaned with laughter, creaked with it. In a moment or two his grunting subsided and she heard the snap of another beer being opened. The heat was terrible, she could scarcely breathe. She yanked the chair control lever angrily back and, to her surprise, the chair responded instantly and rolled her backwards.

She stopped in the center of the room. She tried to get the chair to turn but the control lever had gone dead on her again. She sighed with frustration, and a nervous convulsion shook her violently.

She could only sit.

Hoping for Gwen.

Hating Louie.

Behind her, the sound of a cigarette pack being opened, the soft pop of the breaking seal, a crinkle of paper, a whisper of foil. The hiss and flare of a match.

"By God, you're a damn good dancer, Nanny."

Go to hell, Louie. Light another match. Set yourself on fire.

An acrid scent of sulphur reached her nose.

"A damn good dancer, Nanny. You mus've taught Liz everythin' she knew. Oh, she was a dancer. We had a good time, Nanny, till you bust us up. Real mean of you. You turned her against me an' I never done nothin' to you. Mean. Mean as winter. Tha's you, Nanny. It's your fault me an' her had to go our ways."

Liz didn't go anywhere. You killed her.

"Now she's got nothin'. I got nothin' . . ."

Oh yes you have. You've still got her. You've got her poor dead body out there in the back room, all frost and freezer burn and snowflakes on her eyes. Wrapped up in towels, maybe, or sheets. Like an Egyptian.

"You're hard, Nanny, hard."

Yes. I'm hard. I've had to be. But I'm not like you. Not a killer.

"You're like all those mean people I used to work for. You got no compassion for a man. You got a heart of . . . of ice. Black ice."

Louie was beginning to wander in his thoughts. Beginning to mumble. Nanny was having trouble understanding him.

"You're old, Nanny. Used up. Got only dust in you now. Dust and ice. Ever seen dust and ice mixed together, Nanny? Like a frozen chunk of midnight. Tha's what meanness looks like, Nanny. If we opened you up now with a knife an' looked inside you, tha's what we'd see. Old black ice." She heard him scraping at his cartons for more beer. A clink of glass. "Old things, Nanny, ought to be thrown

away. Heaved down the basement an' tossed on a shelf to keep the dust off it. S'all you're good for now, Nanny. That an' breakin up families."

There were more scuffling cardboard sounds, the chinking of tumbled glass.

Then a roar.

"NANNY!"

She shut her eyes. *Oh, God, what's got at him now, don't let him start flinging me round again, I'll throw up if he does, I'll faint, I'll die, oh please don't let him start in on me again!*

"NANNY, WHY'D YOU GO AN' BUST MY BEER?"

A chair crashed to the floor. Louie came around from the side into her view, breathing raggedly, and towered over her, enormous, dark, full of hurt and poison.

"WHY'D YOU DO IT, NANNY?"

I didn't break it, you stupid, stupid, stupid! Aren't I sitting paralyzed in a wheelchair? Didn't you drop it yourself when you came in? Think, you stupid, think, think!

He leaned even closer, wrinkling his face with disgust and hatred. He was only inches away now, as if he were trying to peer, not just into her eyes, but to something in behind them, her most secret thoughts.

He said, very coldly, his voice like a long sliver of ice that sank into her slowly. "I doan wanna drink with you no more, Nanny. No. I don't. You get mean when you drink, Nanny."

He pulled away then, trying to find his balance.

"An' you're even meaner when you *don't* drink, Nanny."

Leave me alone. Get your horrid stinking face away from me. Don't you dare preach to me about meanness!

"I can be mean, too, Nanny. Real mean. S'at what you want? S'at why you bust up me and Liz? To make me mean—like you?"

Go away!

"Why don't you say something, Nanny?"

BECAUSE I CAN'T! I CAN'T! I WANT TO, BUT I CAN'T!

He put on an expression of mock concern.

"Your eyes, Nanny. They're gettin' all red. You're cryin' inside of that old head, arncha, Nanny?—just the way Liz used to cry after you'd tell her some mean thing about me. Show me some tears now, Nanny. Show me some tears for what you done to me an Liz."

LEAVE ME ALONE! OH, PLEASE, PLEASE, GWEN, COME HOME AND HELP ME NOW . . . !

"I'll get tears out of you, Nanny. Tears for me and Liz." He straightened up, overbalanced and staggered to one side a step. "Soon as I find somethin' in this house to drink." He tottered away, opening drawers, cabinets, peering into corners bleary-eyed. "Mus' be somethin' here. Will, he'll unnerstand when I tell him how you broke my beer. 'Cause of your meanness." He chortled. "I'm gonna have one more drink an' then I'm gonna fix you, Nanny."

You can't drink anything more. You mustn't. Oh dear God in heaven, don't let him find anything more to drink!

He swung her chair rudely to face the wall.

"Doan peek, Nanny."

Nanny looked down at her body, inert and immovable, something separate from herself, remote as a carving. Oh! the things this same body had done years before: like winning the sack race at the Sunday school picnic; and outclimbing the boys on the tree behind Mason's store. And even now she felt the tremendous churning life within it, the rushing and the hurrying of blood in her veins, the quivering nerves that screamed at her *run, run, run*, the terrors exploding in her brain like flash cards, visions of Louie beating her, holding lit cigarettes against her flesh, tipping her out of her chair—

Falling!

Oh, that was the worst!

The falling dream come to life. Full color and immediate. The floor starting toward her slowly, now lifting, now rising, faster, faster, now speeding, hurtling, rocketing at her while her arms planed useless at her sides.

Bang!

It was Louie slamming a cupboard door. He'd found something. A bottle. A quick new thrust of fear stabbed through her.

"Gin, Nanny. Only gin. I hate gin, Nanny, but it's better'n aftershave—better'n Aqua Velva." He cackled at his own wit like some evil warlock; she heard him guzzle a large gulp of gin straight from the bottle, then cough. "And now I'm gonna fix you up a surprise."

Nanny closed her eyes, squeezed them lock-shut tight against the world. The worst had happened. She had prayed he would not find anything to drink, not find anything more to fuel the hatred and violence in him. Gin—straight gin. It was like dashing raw alcohol over naked flame. Surely God had deserted her.

There were muffled thumps behind her, and the creaking of floor-

boards. She heard him grunt, then let out a long low chortle of wicked mirth.

"Just goin' to the sandbox, Nanny. Doan go away."

He shambled away down the hall, past the living room, to the back of the house. A pause. Silence followed by a harsh scrape. A door opening, closing. The flush of the toilet. Then footsteps returning.

He was coming back towards her, staggering. She kept her eyes screwed shut. He was coming, he was here! He turned her chair out into the room so that she could see what he was about. He winked, then moved off again in his uneven drunken tread. She peeked out of herself to see what he was about.

He had crossed the kitchen towards the back room doorway, the entrance to the room where he kept his freezer locked tight. But he didn't enter. He stopped. He bent over, down on one knee, reaching.

What in heaven's name—?

He was lifting the cellar trapdoor. He was throwing back the lid. It yawned like a mouth.

Now he was up and teetering over the black cavern in the floor, swaying dangerously, doing a breath-catching float out over the opening, then lurching safely back to Nanny's side, fumbling in his pocket, clutching, withdrawing.

He dropped a flat steel key into her lap.

"You been wantin' a look into my freezer, Nanny. Well, there it is, waitin'. All you got to do is get to it." He laughed. "'Course, I din want to make it too easy. No fun then, Nanny. So all you got to do is get over to that trap an' drop it down somehow an' roll on in there an' have yourself a look. Simple." He bent crookedly like a kindly uncle offering a gift, and gusted his sour breath into her face. "If you make it past the trap," he whispered, "I'll even help you with the padlock."

He giggled away, pleased with himself, and fell into a chair.

The cellar trap opened sideways and to the right, like the cover of an enormous book. A chain held it upright, almost vertical. It only needed a nudge to send it crashing shut again. She wanted so badly to look into that freezer; already Nanny found herself wondering if there wasn't some way she could manage it. And there was! The way she closed her own bedroom door. She could hook one front wheel behind the door, and turn sharp left to bring the door slamming down. It was dangerous. She could easily fall—fall

into the cellar. But here was the freezer key, here, right in her lap. And out there was the freezer, with Liz beckoning, Liz waiting, Liz calling silently out to her . . . She had to *try*.

She thrust out her fingers to tilt the control switch to roll her forward. Nothing. She flicked at the switch again and again. Dead.

Louie cackled. He drank some more gin.

"S'matter? Outta gas? Dead batt'ry?" He squeaked with laughter, then arched his eyebrows. "Wanna boost?"

That sent a chill of terror through her. The idea of this stumbling drunk wheeling her toward that hole in the floor was too horrifying to imagine. Her fingers danced at the switch. She had to move. Had to—

The motor whirled, rolling her forward.

Louie, already halfway to his feet, collapsed again. He clapped his hands. "Go, Nanny, go! Yeehah!"

The chair hummed Nanny across the kitchen, toward the yawning gulf in the floor. Three feet from the edge of the hole it stopped. Without even wanting to she had let go of the switch. Her nerve had given out. She wanted to continue, wanted to get out to the back room and see her Liz, her Liz, her lonely Liz, but she was brought up sharp by her own fear. Her fear of falling. That fear kept her from Liz as surely as Louie's padlock had done before. In her mind, she wept.

"Nanny! What's wrong now? Damn batt'ry again? I'll help you, Nanny, I'll help . . ."

He was standing now, grinning broadly, holding the gin bottle, swaying forward, catching himself, leaning back again, like a monstrous puppet worked by an uncertain hand on loose strings. A puppet baby taking its first steps. —Look, Ma, no hands!

Stay away, Nanny screamed in her mind, stay away from me! Don't touch me, don't push me into that hole. Oh, Gwen, come home! come home!

Louie took a step towards her, then another, and another.

Gwen, HELP ME!

Louie stretched out his hand for her, and stretching, lost his balance completely, tried to correct for it, leaned back, twirled around and crashed to the floor on his skinny rear end. He sat there a moment, looking back at her stunned. *Maybe he won't get up. Maybe he—*

But he *was* getting up, struggling to his feet and laughing, holding out the gin bottle. "I d'in break it, Nanny. I di'n break it!"

He began rolling her forward.

"Here we go loop-de-loop, Nanny, here we go loop-de-lie . . ."

The cellar door gaped under her wheels like a hungry maw. Two more feet, one . . .

Over the edge!

She closed her eyes. She was falling. It was just the way it had been in her dream. A slow haunting terrifying plunge into a black nothingness. A long trip through forever before the final stunning blow. An age . . .

Nothing.

She opened her eyes.

Louie was reeling around the room like an airplane out of control, laughing fit to bust. The chair was grounded above the hole. Her right front wheel was dangling magically over the abyss. Her left front wheel was caught on the side lip of the hole. If she trembled, breathed, anything, she was going to fall straight in.

"Whooo!" Louie crowed, staggering, going down, kneeling, the bottle swinging out in his hand, catching and reflecting the light. "Whooo!" Then he caught himself up, gasped, and hooted. "Nanny. What happened? Got a flat? Wanna shove?" He came at her again, this time on his knees, his face beet-red with the humor of it all.

NO! Nanny shrieked silently, **GET BACK! STAY— AWAY — FROM—ME!**

She willed him to stop, flung all the strength of her mind at him. And it worked.

He did stop.

And then he fell.

He didn't have far to go, being on his knees already, and he passed out cleanly as he came knee-boning up to her, his face diving by her in a perfect blurred pink arc, his head booming off the sheet metal corner of the stove and hitting the floor with a dull vegetable sound.

This time he didn't move.

First, Nanny told herself, got to get away from this hole.

She feathered the control switch timidly, trembling it back and to the left. Once, three times, five times. Then it caught. The motor hummed. It reversed her clear of the hole.

Louie lay still, his head projecting out past the stove.

His thrusting Adam's apple only a foot from her rear wheel.

A surge of triumph flashed through Nanny and carried her away. Here was her enemy at her mercy! *Not so helpless now, am I?* she gloated. She touched the control switch. The motor hummed. She stopped, and from the corner of her eye she saw Louie's neck under

her big rear wheel, his larynx bulging like a rope, his throat pulsing with each surge of his heart. All she had to do now was . . .

She hesitated. It was too easy. He was so vulnerable lying there.

But what about Liz? Didn't my Liz have a right to enjoy her life, too? It hadn't been too difficult to kill her, had it? Not for a big, strong man like you. Hadn't she been vulnerable? And an execution was something different from a murder, oh yes, something quite different.

Her fingers toyed with the control lever. She watched them in amazement. Her right hand, the only part of her body she'd had any real control over for months, now seemed to have taken on a will of its own. Like a spectator, she watched, as if from a great distance, the fingers having their own way, tightening, tightening . . .

Then Louie's hand closed powerfully on the spokes of her wheel, his one eye flew open, and he grinned.

"Boo!" he said.

She shrieked in silent terror.

Louie clambered to his feet, kicked the trapdoor shut with a crash and a musty wind, and rolled her into the back room. Softly cackling he undid the lock, then paused with his hand on the lid of the freezer. He whispered:

"You ready for this, Nanny? Hope so! It's a horrible sight. A killer."

The lid flew back.

Nanny looked in.

Gentle vapors. Icy crusts. The freezer was empty.

The room spun crazily around her, grew larger, shrank away, went black, then blindingly bright. Louie went tramping away, whooping laughter, panting and wheezing with it, crashing into things. He dragged his parka around his shoulders, fumbled at the doorknob and staggered out into the night. She heard his car start, the crunch of tires on snow as he rolled away.

When Will and Gwen got home, they found Nanny parked inches away from the old stove, which was roaring away against the gale that had got its start at the North Pole, gathered power and speed on a journey to bring it leaping in at Nanny through the door Louie hadn't bothered to close. They shut the door with a huge slam, stood for a moment blinking stupidly at the broken glass, spilled beer, overturned chairs, stove knocked askew on its fireproof pad. Will ran his fingers through his hair; his face was the color of

ashes. Then Gwen was at Nanny's side in a rush, kneeling, clasping Nanny's hand, fussing and full of quick, questioning words, gripping Nanny's fingers tight, her gaze darting from Nanny to the mess in the room and back again.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, so sorry, Nanny, I'll never go off and leave you like that again, never." She looked at Will toeing a sodden beer case with the tip of his shoe. "It was Louie, wasn't it? Oh, God! And he *promised* he'd take care of you." Her voice went suddenly vicious. "I'll never let him set foot in this house again! I won't! I'll throw him out—Will, *you'll* throw him out!" She was starting to cry. "Nanny, I don't know what to say, I'm just—"

She stopped. Swallowed. Stared.

Will was mumbling away to himself: "Must've been in one of his moods. Nothing *she* could do. She must've just sat here, scared out of her wits . . ."

But Gwen stared past him. Stared into the back room with a feeling of numb bewilderment. Will turned to gaze with her into the back room shadows, at the long white waiting freezer with its lid thrown back. They then went slowly together to stand with linked hands and peer into the frosted emptiness. They turned then and looked at Nanny. Put their heads together, buzzed.

Gwen said sternly, "This freezer is empty, Nanny!"

Will stooped over her.

"Nanny, tell the truth, did you start in on him? That's it, isn't it? You made him understand your . . . your accusations. He got angry and raged around. Broke things. Then he gave you what you wanted—let you see into the freezer. That's what happened, isn't it, Nanny?" His voice was as firm and stern as his face. "I guess when he cools down and comes back, you'll owe him an apology, won't you?"

Gwen was glancing around the room, eyes angry with tears.

"Oh, this *mess*! This awful *mess*!"

Gwen and Will both shook their heads. They'd had enough.

And so had Nanny. Her trembling fingers clutched at her control lever, and the chair obediently responded, whispered her off to her room with a silk swiftness of rubber tires on linoleum. She whirled past the living room where the shadows sat slumped in the chairs, along the twilight hall to the back of the house, turned into her room, spun expertly, and caught the door with her right footrest to send it slamming shut.

The drapes were still undrawn, the night pushing in through the glass and filling the room with itself. An otherwise empty room.

Like Nanny's heart. Empty yet tidy, with all the emptiness in its place.

You're too old. Too old and too foolish. A stupid. There's no place for you here any more. You caused trouble tonight. You drove Louie and Liz apart with your whisperings. You're a misery, you leave trails of miserableness behind you, it rubs off you onto other people. . . .

You're responsible for everything that's happened between those two young people.

Gwen came into the room so briskly the edge of the door clunked into Nanny's chair. She swooped in on a flood of dim electric light from the hall. She put firm hands on Nanny, hands that Nanny knew had been cleaning up the mess, impatient, sudden hands. Hands that said by their movements that they'd be better occupied somewhere else. Gwen lifted Nanny in a brisk Victorian Nurse dead lift, stretched her on the bed, tumbled her quickly out of her clothes and into her nightie, rolled her under the quilt, kissed her with hard, dry lips.

"Now you just go right to sleep. We'll have a good talk about this in the morning." She paused at the door. "I hope you're satisfied. I don't know *how* I'm going to deal with Will and Louie after this."

The door closed.

All right, then. Be in a snit. Don't even ask me if I have to go to the bathroom. Blame me for everything. I don't mind. I know it's my fault. You can punish me, dump me into this old cold bed.

And it was a cold bed. Colder than it ought to be . . .

That's what guilt does to a person. Stops their circulation. Bed, get colder. I deserve it.

And it did. A numbing cold was creeping out of the bedding in waves. Also a frosty, cloying damp which gradually became a long slim bulk under the quilt only inches away. And then she knew she was not alone in her bed.

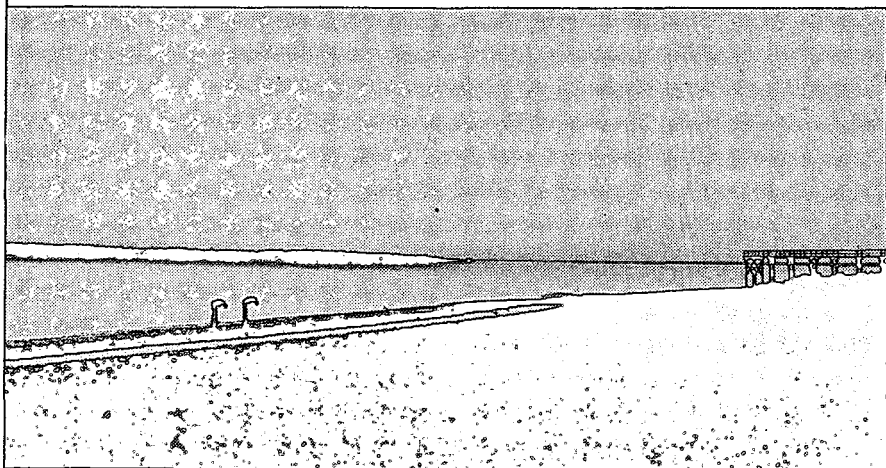
Not alone at all.

She remembered those few moments earlier when she had sat in the corner and listened to Louie's heavy footsteps in the hall.

There was, after all, something much worse than falling.

She began her silent screams.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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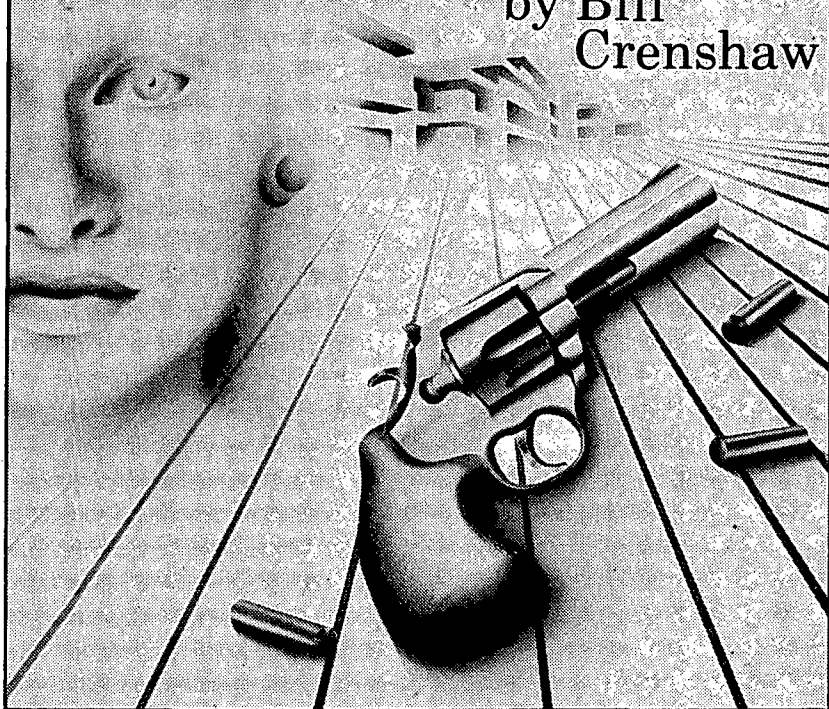
We bent over forwards to find this picture. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the August Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Suits of Woe

by Bill Crenshaw



“Murder,” said Fat Chance, propping a folded newspaper against Adam’s iced tea, resting its base on his apple pie. “Murder,” he said again.

The newspaper was three

weeks old. CITY MOURNS SLAIN PHYSICIAN, said the headline. HUNDREDS ATTEND POTTER-FIELD RITES.

Adam looked to Ginger, but she wouldn’t even raise an eyebrow. Fat Chance leaned back

in his chair as one who had just shocked his audience into silence.

"Of course it was murder," said Adam, lifting the paper and wiping apple from the fold. "Everyone knows it was murder. It says it was murder."

Fat Chance plucked the paper back, opened it to page two, and reinserted it into Adam's plate. "Murderer," he said, tapping the stained photograph, a picture of a woman in black, face turned toward the camera but looking through the photographer, through the reader. It was a picture of the widow of the late Dr. Julian D. Potterfield.

"What we got here is the Cannon case, only vicy versa. What we need, Adam, is you."

Adameus Clay, as always, looked as if he were smiling, even though the rising sense of dread had by this time climbed to just beneath his larynx. He wanted to ask Fat Chance what he meant by "Cannon case in reverse," but he didn't dare. That way madness lay.

"Don't start this, Marvyn," said Ginger.

"Start what? He's got the time. Classes haven't started, right?"

"Last time you both could have been killed. Remember last time? A one-way boat ride in the tidal marshes? Could

that have been just six weeks ago?"

"I said *Cannon* case, sis. You know, paperwork, reports—office stuff."

"When you two start playing detective . . ."

"*Playing?*" Fat Chance drew himself up. "What, we got a wife killer in the Cannon case, a drug ring on Fishhook Island, a couple of cons in the fall-off-the-fence scam, and Adam by himself got that other professor off the hook for murdering his own sweetie, which, if you want to know the truth, I think was too young for him anyway and he should've known better." Adam saw Ginger lean forward. Fat Chance had gone too far. Adam was Ginger's senior by eighteen years.

"Uh, no offense," said Fat Chance quickly, leaning away from his sister. "I mean, there's not as much difference between your ages."

Ginger sat back. Fat Chance took that as a good sign.

"We've got a better record than *playing* detective," he continued. "And, anyway, I'm not talking danger here. It's a little old lady. She bumped off her husband, that's all. Probably took her weeks to just to get up the nerve, and even then, he was probably asleep. We're safe."

"Fine," said Ginger. "You do

it. Leave us out of it."

"The policy is half a million," Fat Chance said, looking at Adam. "That's seventy-five thousand dollars split two ways if we nail her. How does that stack up against a professor's salary? How's Brownhildy running these days?"

"Brunhilde," said Adam, knowing that Fat Chance knew full well that the car, the beautiful maroon 1948 Studebaker, was in the shop again. He turned to Ginger. "Well," he said, not quite believing what he was about to say, "maybe we should look into it."

Ginger set her jaw. "She did not kill her husband."

"Hey, sis, come on," said Fat Chance. "You ask her? You know her?"

"I knew him," said Ginger, rising with her plate.

"More coffee?" Fat Chance said, holding out his cup and pushing, Adam felt, his luck.

Ginger took the cup and stalked to the kitchen.

Fat Chance leaned over the table. "What gives here?"

"Dr. Potterfield delivered the twins," Adam whispered.

Fat Chance paused, apparently waiting for the rest of it. Nothing else came. "So?" he said. "You paid him, right? He didn't do it *gratis*, did he?"

"He treated people with respect," said Ginger, banging Fat Chance's cup down so hard

that coffee swirled over the lip.

"He treated *women* with respect. Not like their new gynecologist, that *kid* who asked me if I'd managed to tee-tee yet when he wanted a urine specimen." She banged down his spoon. "Cream and sugar?"

"So what are you saying, she couldn't kill Dr. Nice Guy?"

Ginger stirred her coffee.

"Well?" said Fat Chance.

"You make it sound so trivial, Marvyn. One of your talents. Yes, I'm saying she couldn't kill Dr. Nice Guy. Why would she?"

Fat Chance raised his hand and rubbed thumb and forefinger back and forth across each other.

Ginger shook her head. "They had enough."

"It's never enough," Fat Chance said.

"It always comes down to money for you, doesn't it?"

"It comes down to money for everybody. That's the weather. You don't have to like it, but you better carry your umbrella."

"What would she do with money?" said Ginger. "Sit on more boards? Support more charities? You're saying she murdered her husband to get more money to give it away?"

"Maybe it wasn't only the money," said Fat Chance. "Maybe he was a beater, like Dr. Potterfield in public, Mr.

Hyde at home. Or maybe she had a little something going on the side and a cool half a mil would set her and her honey up on some Caribbean sand somewhere. Come on, sis. Mr. and Mrs. Perfect in public can do all kinds of things behind closed doors. You act like things are what they seem."

"Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?" said Adam, without thinking.

"Right." Fat Chance smiled and nodded. "Exactly."

Ginger turned a slow, cold eye to Adam. "Once," she said, "you quoted Shakespeare."

Adam blushed.

"Once," said Fat Chance to Ginger, "you were a newsman. Woman. Person. Newsperson."

Ginger waited.

"What I mean is, you used to know all this stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Money. Murder. Page one stuff. You used to be good, sis." He turned to Adam. "Real muckraker, you know, like a Mike Wallace in drag. Made 'em squirm."

"Okay, Marvyn," Ginger said with a tone of infinite if strained patience. "Okay. Something got you going on this case. Why don't you tell me where you got the idea that Mrs. Nice Guy killed Dr. Nice Guy."

Fat Chance lifted his plate. "More pie?"

"No more pie."

Fat Chance pushed his plate aside and shifted forward, resting his weight on his forearms. "I got a tip. I got told, 'Hey, Marv, this one I'd look into.' Can't say any more. Ask me no questions."

"So you looked," said Ginger. "What did you find?"

"Okay. Wife comes home after lunch and finds her husband lying shot in bed. But who does she call? Ambulance? Police? No. Pinewood Security, the rent-a-cops on the gate who get paid by her fancy neighborhood to protect them from this kind of thing. And of course they do just what you'd expect rent-a-cops to do, they tromp all over the evidence so that when the real cops come, they can't do their jobs."

"You're saying that's what she wanted them to do."

"Good, but doesn't quite work. She says somebody broke in and stole a pearl necklace and matching earrings. But B and E types are low risk punks, in and out fast, no hassle. They don't want trouble. They're usually kids and they don't carry guns. Who else but a wife is gonna shoot a man lying in bed?"

"A sister," said Ginger.

"Now just listen a sec. Why take pearls? There's other stuff lying around they could have grabbed. There's a wallet full of cash and plastic on the same

dresser. It'd take two more seconds. Why not grab and go?"

"Lots of reasons," Ginger said.

"Like what?"

"Well, like—well, say they get to the bedroom and there's Dr. Potterfield taking a nap. He wakes up. They reach for the closest thing on the dresser, the necklace. They tell him not to move and he won't get hurt. He starts to get up. They shoot. He's hit and falls on the bed. They run out."

"Nah," said Fat Chance. "Whoever shot him was right next to him. A little cone-shaped spread of powder burns on his shirt. And the angle of entry is up, right to left and up."

"So?" said Adam.

Fat Chance punched his forefinger into his right side just below his sternum and traced a path up and over, crossing his heart. "So he was shot in bed."

"Not necessarily," said Ginger. "It means that the evidence is consistent with his being shot while lying down."

"So you're saying," Adam said to Fat Chance, "that if he was shot in bed, the wife shot him because the intruders wouldn't."

"Right," said Fat Chance. "Why should they? They're after easy money. They're jumpy and they're scared, and if you corner them, yeah, a problem maybe, but they don't pop guys asleep."

"Maybe he cornered them,"

said Adam. "Maybe they shot him and he fell back into bed."

"Angle of entry is up, remember. That means he was lying down."

"No," said Ginger. "There are other possibilities."

"Like what?"

"A struggle. Potterfield knocks down the man with the gun, the man shoots him from the floor. Angle of entry up."

Fat Chance was silent.

"See?" said Ginger.

"Powder burns on shirt," Fat Chance said.

"Potterfield is standing right over him. That's close enough."

"Yeah, but what's the chance that he'd fall on the bed like that?" Fat Chance pulled an eight by ten from his briefcase. "Look at him."

Dr. Potterfield was on his back in bed, reclining more than lying on the covers, propped on fat pillows, right foot dangling—an awkward angle, but he might be asleep, might have sat down to read and just drifted off. But the room was a mess.

"Damnit, Marvyn, there *was* a struggle," said Ginger. "Look at that room."

Fat Chance stood behind them. "Nah," he said, pointing with a pencil. "Look. Lamp knocked down. Table knocked over. Chair knocked over. Books on the floor. That's not a strug-

gle. That's what somebody does to make it look like a struggle. They watch too much TV. And the only marks on the body are from the gunshot. No bruises, no scratches. No strug

Ginger turned the photograph over but there was nothing on the back. "Police photographs."

Fat Chance held up his hands. "Ask me no questions," he said, shaking his head.

"If the police suspect something," said Adam, "why don't they pursue it?"

"They are. They're pursuing this alleged thief. But the more they look for him, the thinner he gets. So let's say, hypothetical, that you're a detective sergeant who starts getting an itchy nose over all this. Let's say you go to your captain and say, 'I got an itch.' This is Pinewood Estates we're talking here. Very upper upper middle, right? The captain's a civil servant looking to his future. He wants to make waves in Pinewood? Wants to arrest Mrs. Nice Guy? No percentage there, unless he's in love with being a captain. So your itch doesn't get scratched. But let's say you know a guy in the concerned insurance company and the guy's got a reputation for busting scams lately. So let's say you hang around the darkroom and the Xerox machine for a while and then

pass him what he needs. Maybe he can chase her down, you think."

Adam shook his head. "Why should she kill him? People don't do that kind of thing."

"If wishes were fishes we'd be knee deep in scales. Adam, old buddy, old bean, old chap, you sprung the Cannon case. Husband icepicks wife and almost kills himself in the car wreck to make it look like she died by accident. Want to tell me people don't do that kind of thing?"

Adam wished he could argue.

"So," Fat Chance said, "where you come in is like with your old world charm, your dignity, you know? I mean, face it; this is a woman with certain la-di-da expectations. I know my strengths. I can deal with the guys in Buzz's Auto Body Barn. I'm not real good at balancing little teacups on my knees. I think she'd rather talk to you than me."

"You mean" said Ginger, "that you think Adam can get more out of her than you."

"I thought I said that."

"No," said Ginger. "I will not have you badgering that poor woman."

"Come on, sis. The appointment's already set up."

"We will not intrude on her grief. Will we, Adam." It was not a question.

Adam cleared his throat.

"What if Marvyn is . . ."

"What if he isn't? I won't be the agent of pain on the slim chance that Marvyn knows what he's talking about."

"Well," said Fat Chance, "that's not exactly the issue. We got an appointment. Somebody's gonna see her in my office tomorrow. Either Adam or me."

A long silence followed. Adam watched Ginger sidelong. Send Adam or unleash Fat Chance. The sins of commission vs. those of omission. Fat Chance was playing hardball.

"Saaay," said Fat Chance, "I got an idea. Why don't you go, too: Adam's secretary or something."

"Colleague," said Ginger.

"Then you'll go?"

"No. Nice try, Marvyn. No."

"Look, here it is. You go with Adam and talk to her. If you two think she's okay, fine, that's it, it ends right there."

Ginger looked to Adam. He could see she was tempted—she could protect Mrs. Potterfield from Fat Chance completely. She was waiting for Adam's advice. He cleared his throat. "'Tis dangerous to come between the pass of mighty opposites," he said. "Shakespeare." He smiled.

"Thanks a lot," said Ginger. She turned to Fat Chance. "We can't do it. We have no authority."

"Adam's a claims investiga-

tor. Been congratulated by old man Carroll himself. What more do you want?"

Ginger chewed her thumbnail. "The twins."

"I'll keep them."

Adam saw something akin to panic flit across Ginger's eyes.

"No, but thanks, really . . ."

"They'll love it."

"Thanks, Marvyn, but . . ."

"Angelbuttons," he bellowed. "Ho, angelbuttons." The twins came tearing in from their room and leapt at his ample lap. "Would you like your uncle M&M to stay with you tomorrow morning?"

"Oh, yes," they said breathlessly. "Can he, Mommy?"

Ginger looked at Fat Chance and narrowed her eyes. "No candy," she said.

"Hey, sis," said Fat Chance, palms up. "Whatever you want."

From the moment Edna Potterfield opened her mouth, Adam was ashamed.

Across the desk from Adam she sat with an intense rigor, as if trying to become stone. Adam smiled and offered her a cup of tea. She declined.

Adam lifted his teabag from the cup. It turned slowly as he let the last few drops fall from a corner into the tea. He felt steeped in guilt.

The questions were organized randomly, Fat Chance had

explained, to break up the chronology. People whose stories were memorized had problems with their facts if they had to deal with the facts out of sequence. Adam had said that he didn't know enough about the case to catch such discrepancies. Fat Chance said not to worry, it was all being tape recorded.

Ginger sat to Adam's left, leaning back, elbows on the armrests, fingers lightly interlaced before her. She seemed an ambiguous presence, neither secretary nor colleague. She seemed an observer sent to pass judgment on them both.

Adam cleared his throat. It was routine, he told himself. Somebody has to do it. Would you mind answering a few more questions, just to double check the details, all part of the process, we're sorry to have to ask you, etc., etc.

And he really was sorry, truly sorry, would rather be anywhere but where he was, but he had his list, and he went down it dutifully, question by question.

What time had she arrived home?

—A little before one, she thought.

Why had she called the security guards instead of the police or an ambulance?

—She had pushed the automatic dial button for emergen-

cies, she had just picked up the phone and pushed the button, what else should she have done?

Had her husband been alive when she found him?

—No. No.

How could she know, how could she be sure, Ginger asked.

—She had been a medical student herself, she said. She had become pregnant and married Dr. Potterfield and dropped out. She had lost the baby and couldn't bring herself to re-apply to medical school. But she had seen enough to know death when she saw it. From the door he looked asleep. There wasn't much blood. But up close he was dead.

Had anything else turned up missing?

—Only the necklace and the earrings, only those.

And on, and on, Mrs. Potterfield polite and anguished, Adam trying to be dispassionate and sympathetic at once, and doing neither, concentrating on Mrs. Potterfield herself, on the tailored black suit whose hem quivered as she sat; the strong, quiet voice never far from breaking; the large handbag she clutched and squeezed before her, fingers digging into the dark brown leather as she answered and rocked back and forth ever so slightly, fingers never leaving the handbag even to wipe away the tear that occasionally slid down her cheek

and onto her blouse. She sat forward as if to give her words more force, her knees and ankles pressed together, her eyes no higher than the end of Adam's nose when she answered his questions. Adam hardly heard her answers, did not want to hear them, too painful, they were being taped anyway. Adam thought he should at least tell her about the recorder, but Fat Chance had said that there was no use taping people who knew they were being taped.

Adam felt only the terrible need to stop.

Finally, his list ended. Mrs. Potterfield rose stiffly and shook their hands before leaving. It was over. They could tell Fat Chance to forget this one, that she was grieving widow and not murderer. His own guilt hung heavy on him, and he wanted Ginger to tell him that it was okay, that he had only been doing a job. Ginger sat unmoving, staring into the distance.

"Ginger?" he asked.

She looked up. "What did you see?" she asked.

Adam frowned. "In Mrs. Potterfield?"

Ginger nodded.

"Grief."

"There's more than grief here," said Ginger, rubbing her lower lip with an index finger. "We saw more than grief. She was afraid of something."

Adam didn't understand. "Of what?"

Ginger looked up, her face showing surprise and distress. "Of us, I think. Of me." She sighed. "Marvyn may be right. She's lying."

Adam felt suddenly lost.

Back home, Fat Chance was delighted. "I told you there was something there. I knew it."

The tone was unmistakably Fat Chance—triumphant, gleeful, rub-your-nose-in-it.

"I disagree," Adam said. "I don't think there's anything there."

"But, Adam," said Ginger, "why did she come at all? I wouldn't have come, not if you'd been dead a little month."

"Lovely thought," Adam muttered.

"Over insurance! How dare they ask such questions! I'd have the lawyer deal with it. I'd be outraged. She wasn't outraged. She wasn't even angry. She was polite . . ."

"Is that a fault?"

"Yes, in this case, yes, a fault. We were horrible. We had no right. She just took it. I'm a polite person, Adameus Clay, but I'd raise holy hell. They'd hear me on the top floor. Courtesy has its limits. One does not tip one's hat to vultures."

"Hey, now, sis," protested Fat Chance "just a minute here."

Insurance is one of the most imp . . .”

“I’m not talking about you,” snapped Ginger. “I’m talking about me.” She shook her head as if avoiding insects.

“You blaming yourself?” said Fat Chance. “She offed her husband. That your fault?”

Ginger took a tissue from her purse and dabbed at her eyes. “Muckraker’s guilt,” she said. “Muckrakers get their hands dirty, even when they do it right.”

“Maybe she came because she is polite,” said Adam. “I would have gone, but that wouldn’t mean I didn’t love you.”

Ginger laughed through tears and touched Adam’s cheek. She cleared her throat and sat up straight. “But she is *not* you, Adam. And you *would* have protested—very politely, I know, with great courtesy, but you would have said something. The lady did not protest too much. The lady did not protest at all.”

“Sure,” said Fat Chance, “didn’t dare. Afraid she wouldn’t get the money. Afraid to tick off the guys who write the check. Afraid they might start digging or that they’d already scratched up a bone or two.”

Ginger shook her head. “Not the money. But yes, afraid we suspected something or that we had something. What, I wonder? She was giving us great

answers, long answers. Almost never just a yes or no. Explanations. Too much. Too cooperative.”

“Too polite?” asked Adam. “Too cooperative, too helpful? More virtues become vices?”

“I wasted the interview,” said Ginger. “I didn’t take it seriously and hadn’t done my homework and went in with assumptions. Exactly what paperwork do you have, Marvyn?”

“Police reports, coroner’s report, pictures of the scene. Enough to fry a hypothetical detective sergeant’s hypothetical rear end. So we have to be careful.”

“What’s hypothetically in it for him?”

“Justice. Hypothetically he wants to see justice done.”

Ginger stared.

“Hypothetically,” said Fat Chance after a time, “he thinks his captain’s a dipwad.”

“Okay, then. New assumptions. No. *No* assumptions. In case it is the money—how much did you say?”

“Half a million,” said Fat Chance.

“Can Acme run a credit check? Maybe she’s in deep somewhere. Maybe she’s flat broke. And I’ll need to see the police and coroner’s reports. And a transcript of the interview. Adam, can you think of anything? Did you look for anything in the Cannon case?”

Adam sighed. He had stumbled onto the answer in the Cannon case before there was even a question. Now people thought he was an expert. "I just looked," he said. "The answer found me."

Ginger paused a second. "Look, you don't have to do this. If you feel uncomfortable . . ."

"I do," said Adam. "Thank God I still feel that, at least. I'll keep the twins. It's my turn. You and Marvyn can take this one."

So that afternoon when Fat Chance brought what he had to the house and he and Ginger spread the files over the dining room table and made lists of what they had and what they needed, the twins introduced Adam to Mr. Rogers, and Bert and Ernie, and Big Bird. He was glad to back off.

But they wouldn't let him. Fat Chance and Ginger brought him ideas and details, asked his opinion and advice, asked, he felt, for his approval. He didn't approve. He didn't approve at all. He thought they were making a terrible mistake. He still saw Mrs. Potterfield's fingernails digging into the handbag, white knuckles and pale nailbeds against dark leather, the tension in her hands belying the flat voice, the stony cheek betrayed by the occasional tear. He had seen, he thought, grief battling courage.

But Ginger thought otherwise.

One of them was wrong. Mrs. Potterfield was either guilty or not guilty. If she were guilty, if she *had* murdered her husband, he didn't want to know about it. If she were innocent . . . well, then he couldn't justify what he had done, what they had put her through. And if guilty, what could they do? And if innocent, what had they done?

If it weren't for Ginger, he'd tell Fat Chance what he could do with his amused cynicism. If Ginger didn't agree with Fat Chance, he'd . . .

But Ginger did agree. So he kept his mouth shut, and when they sat and explained what they were finding, where they were going, asked how it looked so far, he listened and nodded and appeared to be smiling, and they thanked him and went back to the dining room, confident that they were making progress.

After Fat Chance finally left, promising to see them early in the A.M., Ginger was eager to talk about what they'd found, and Adam tried to listen but found himself growing angrier at the whole thing.

He never raised his voice, never showed his feelings, he thought, but she could tell that he didn't want to hear, so she stopped.

They started again early the next morning, at an hour Adam thought was unknown to Fat Chance. "Early to bed makes a man wealthy," Fat Chance said when Ginger teased him.

He had new information. Acme had access to a recent credit check. It was a dead end. "I should have her money problems," Fat Chance said.

"No motive, no murder?" Adam asked hopefully.

Fat Chance laughed. Ginger patted Adam's hand. Adam smiled, pretending he had made a joke.

It bothered him that Ginger was so intent, was so certain of Mrs. Potterfield's guilt. It seemed unlike the Ginger he thought he knew, wife of twelve years. But then he hadn't met her until she was almost thirty, hadn't known her in newspaper work, which he thought she enjoyed, or in TV news, which she couldn't speak of except with venom. What had she been like? Had her life been more interesting? She knew about things like angles of entry and evidence consistent with. Was she anxious to get back to something more exciting than a professor of English and a set of two-year-old twins? Fat Chance should know. He had known her longer than Adam had. Maybe he knew her better. Adam suddenly found himself

jealous of his brother-in-law. He felt left out.

So he left the twins with Mr. Rogers and drifted to the dining room table. "How's it going?" he asked.

Ginger said they were building the chronology of the day of the murder. She showed him their chart.

Their earliest known time was one eighteen, the time the 911 operator received the call from Pinewood Security. Assuming that Pinewood called 911 immediately, then Mrs. Potterfield had called them to report the murder between one-fifteen and one-seventeen. But she had come through the gate at least twenty minutes earlier, perhaps thirty.

"You can see some problems here," said Fat Chance. "When did the wife get home? Why did she wait so long to call? Why did she call security instead of 911?"

"The police arrive at one thirty-one," said Ginger, "the ambulance at one thirty-three. Those times are solid. Pinewood Security is not so meticulous in calling in, so we don't know for certain what time they get to the scene. A good guess is one twenty-two. Within five minutes, a Dr. Jonathan Drew arrives, friend of the family, apparently called by Mrs. Potterfield. The security guards think he is supposed to pro-

nounce death, so they take him up to the bedroom. How much of the scene he disturbs, if any, isn't clear. There was disturbance. It could have been Drew, Mrs. Potterfield, or security."

Adam looked at the times, but they meant nothing. To Fat Chance and Ginger the chronology was clear and precise, but they had been working on it since yesterday. Ginger was looking at him as if she expected a comment. He wanted to say that it was all nonsense, waste of time, invasion of privacy. "So," he said instead, "why did Dr. Potterfield stay home that day?"

"Didn't stay home," said Fat Chance. "Went into work."

"We don't know that yet," said Ginger. "We know he went out. He came back through the gate between noon and twelve fifteen. That is, after the noon news had begun and before the weather. Security was watching TV in the gatehouse. Mrs. Potterfield also went out. Left tenish. Came back between twelve fifty and one. The guard is sure that *Jeopardy* wasn't over, but that the stewardess had won."

"*Jeopardy*?" said Adam.

"Game show," said Fat Chance, as if Adam should have known. "So, we got more problems. A little after noon, the husband comes home. Not his habit."

"We don't know that," said Ginger. "Stick to what you know."

"Okay, so maybe moneybags comes home and makes his own tuna sandwich every day. Maybe that's how he gets so rich. Anyway, about a half hour later, the wife comes home, or comes through the gate, if we want to get picky. About another twenty, twenty-five minutes after that she calls the gate and says her husband's been shot. Some delay. What happened? She goes home, finds the body, vacuums the rug, washes the dishes, *then* calls the gate?"

Adam remembered the voice, the clutching fingernails, the quivering hem.

"She said that she blanked out," Adam said. "She said that she didn't find him right away, that she thought he might be outside, that when she found him she blanked out and the next thing she knew she was on the kitchen phone calling the gate."

"There's a phone in the bedroom right next to the body," said Ginger. "She didn't use it. I don't know what that means, if anything."

"It means that she blanked out and found herself on the kitchen phone," said Adam.

"It means she *said* she called from the kitchen," said Fat Chance.

"So the first question," said

Ginger, raising her voice just a tad, "is what happened in that half hour. The first, and the last, and the hardest."

"What happened," said Fat Chance, "is that she got home, sneaked upstairs, popped hubby on the bed, knocked over the lamp and the table and threw some books around, buried the pistol and the necklace under the azaleas, washed her hands in the kitchen sink, and called the gate."

The tone finally did it. "What happened," Adam said, "is you don't know what happened."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Where do you get stuff like 'popped her hubby'?"

"Give me a better story."

"Her story. She came home and found her husband dead. The next thing she knows she's calling for help. Why can't it be just like she said?"

"She was lying, Adam," said Ginger. "I know she was lying."

"How do you know that? I don't know that."

"Maybe you should just let us work on this case. This bothers you too much."

"Yeah," said Fat Chance. "If you can't stand the heat, cool it."

"Shut up, Marvyn," said Ginger.

"I'll match you," Adam said to Fat Chance, "point for point. Whatever theory you have, I'll give you one just as sound."

"Adam," said Ginger, "let us do this."

"Come on, sis," said Fat Chance. "Don't protect him."

"Point for point," said Adam.

"Point for point," said Fat Chance.

"Fine," said Ginger. "Point for point. We can test each other. But you will both be civil, or you will both be very sorry."

"Who plugged Potterfield?" said Fat Chance. "If it wasn't her, where are the perps? How'd they get past the gate without being seen? Why did they go to Potterfield's and nowhere else? How did they get in without jimmying a lock or smashing a window? Why did they go straight to the back bedroom? Why did they only take a necklace and a pair of earrings, which would be hard to move, and leave the cash, and leave the credit cards which people'll come to you to fence? And why did they shoot the doc? That's a whole new category past B and E. That's heavy time. That's maybe electric city."

"They got in by driving in," said Adam. "They drove a BMW or a Mercedes or a Volvo, and the guard looked up and saw the kind of car he expected and looked down. They drove to Potterfield's because it was the first likely looking place, or maybe they knew what they wanted there. They got in because Dr. Potterfield was home

and hadn't locked the door. They went to the back bedroom because they were after jewelry, and that's in bedrooms, not kitchens, not dens. They got what they wanted and took it. They shot Dr. Potterfield because he woke up and they panicked. Then they just drove out. They got in their car and just left. And when Mrs. Potterfield came home and found her husband, the shock was too much and she blanked out. We've got the same facts. I've got a different theory. It fits all the facts just as well as yours. It fits better. She didn't kill her husband."

They stood staring at each other.

"What about it, sis?" said Fat Chance. "Who's right?"

Ginger stared at the space between them. "Maybe I'm wrong. I think she was lying. It all seemed so clean then, but now . . ."

Adam started smiling.

"Come on, sis, don't let me down now. She was lying. Something's not kosher here."

The phone rang. Adam excused himself to answer it, glad to leave the room, afraid that he might start gloating like Fat Chance. In the cool light of reason, Ginger was abandoning Fat Chance's theories. Mrs. Potterfield was innocent.

He picked up the receiver. "Hello?" he said.

"Mr. Clay?" The voice was male and unfamiliar.

"Yes?"

"Adam Clay?"

"Yes?"

"I don't know what your game is, but if you don't leave Mrs. Potterfield alone, you'll pay bloody hell." The caller slammed his receiver down.

Ginger must have seen something in his face. "What is it?" she asked.

"A threat, I think," he said, with a thin smile. "Actually, I'm quite sure it was a threat."

"That means she's got an accomplice," said Fat Chance. "Whoever it was that called you, Adam, it wasn't her, right? She's got some guy to do her threatening for her. And if she's threatening, she's definitely up to her neck. Like I said up front."

Adam was indignant. She had betrayed him. He had fought Ginger and Fat Chance, had argued for her innocence, and he had been duped. It wasn't being wrong, he could admit he was wrong, he didn't mind that. He did mind Fat Chance's gloating. What burned was the sense of betrayal.

He moved from the living room to the dining room table.

But he was worried about the phone call, worried that the threat might prove real. He

asked if they should back off a little.

"Nah," said Fat Chance. "Don't cut on the fan, turn up the heat. We're just getting somebody to sweat."

"Yes, but who? That wasn't Mrs. Potterfield on the phone. There's someone else who knows, who's nervous. Maybe the real killer. Maybe someone she hired."

"Maybe her honey," said Fat Chance.

"Somebody with something to lose," said Adam. "I don't like it."

"Part of the game," said Fat Chance. "Poke a stick down a hole, snakes come out. That's why you poke in the first place."

"What do you think?" Adam asked Ginger.

She stared out of the kitchen window. "I don't like it either. But we can't stop for one phone call."

"How about two?" Adam said, only half joking.

"At two we reconsider."

Ginger and Adam sat up late into the night after Fat Chance had gone home to Ruth. There was so much material, and so little of it said anything. Ginger lifted a stack of photocopies, photographs, notes, schedules, forms, reports, possibilities. They drooped in her hand. "Even if we knew for sure what happened, we couldn't prove it."

"Somebody disagrees," said

Adam. "Somebody thinks we can."

"Yes, well," said Ginger, "maybe. I can't think any more. Let's sleep on it."

But Adam had trouble sleeping. He kept thinking about betrayal. He felt personally betrayed, but he knew she hadn't really betrayed him. She had betrayed her husband. But not only her husband. She had betrayed something deeper—vows, oaths, bonds, something central to civilization, a betrayal from one who, more than most, polished the veneer of civilization to a high gloss. Civilization shouldn't be a veneer.

But maybe . . .

Who knew what had gone on inside that house, that bedroom? Maybe she had been victim. Maybe she had been abused. Maybe killing her husband was an act of self-defense. And then maybe she staged the break-in because she faced the same problem faced by the hypothetical police captain, the problem of trying to prove something that no one wanted to believe about Dr. Potterfield—that saint was sinner, perhaps monster.

He turned onto his side. On his back, the way he usually slept, he kept seeing the image of Dr. Potterfield lying as if asleep, betrayed.

He dreamed of Deianira giving Heracles the poisoned cloak, and Medea wreaking her ter-

rible vengeance on Jason, and Agamemnon dead.

Adam overslept. When he got up, Fat Chance was already at the table and Ginger was on the phone, her coffee cold beside her. They may have nodded a good morning to him; he wasn't certain. He pulled his robe around him and headed for the shower.

The shower woke him up, which he was not sure he wanted.

Ginger had a fresh pot of coffee waiting. She handed him a cup and launched right in. "She was at a luncheon, for the Hospital Auxiliary. It probably started at noon, which means she left early. I want you to go to the library and see what the newspapers have on the luncheon. The evening paper should have more. They cater to the doctor-lawyer set. And while you're there, check the last couple of months and see if there's anything on the Potterfields or on Drew, Dr. Jonathan Drew."

"You think Drew's the honey, huh?" said Fat Chance.

"I think Drew was on the scene pretty fast. That's all. No assumptions."

Adam spent the rest of the morning in the library, finding little new. Mrs. Potterfield was among those to be honored at the Hospital Auxiliary lunch-

eon at the Wadsworth on the day of the murder. The luncheon did start at noon. Mrs. Potterfield had been home not later than one. Which meant she had left the luncheon early. They'd have to find out why.

There were pictures with the article, a couple of group shots of people at tables, some close-ups of handshakes being exchanged and plaques being passed. Mrs. Potterfield was in one of the group shots. Adam almost did not recognize her. She was smiling, her face transformed. He didn't know what to make of the face that would look down at a dying husband a few hours, no, within an hour of the time the picture was taken. One may smile and smile, he thought.

The picture Xeroxed well.

Hé was home before lunch. Fat Chance was gone. Adam showed what he had to Ginger. She too was struck by the face, the apparent vitality of it. They both found it depressing.

"Well." Ginger shrugged. "Anything else? Anything on Drew?"

Adam said no.

Ginger had made lunch for the twins and was on her way to have lunch with Drew's receptionist.

"How did you manage that?" asked Adam.

Ginger smiled ruefully. "I once did hold it a baseness to

write fair—or speak fair, in this case. I asked her, with my best reportorial style. She said yes. The truth is, people like to talk about other people. I don't know whether that's good or bad. There may be a call from Potterfield's group while I'm gone. I'm due for a checkup anyway, so they're trying to work me into a cancellation. I want to talk to some nurses."

"What can they tell you?" asked Adam.

Ginger shrugged. "What the office was like before the killing. If Potterfield always went home at noon. I don't know."

"Marvyn?"

"Running down some stuff at work. But he's going to talk to the security guards, find out a little more about the wife's demeanor on the phone and at the scene. And who talked to Drew first, and what Drew did. If he calls, tell him to check with the maitre d' at the Wadsworth. Maybe he remembers something."

On her way out, Ginger picked up the Xeroxed picture and studied the smiling face once more. She handed the picture to Adam. "She's wearing pearls," she said.

A phone call from Potterfield's group gave Ginger a two thirty appointment. She got back from lunch with just enough

time to change and go out again.

"Anything from the receptionist?" Adam asked as she dressed.

Ginger shook her head. "I don't know." She sighed. "Something was going on that day. Some time after eleven fifteen or so, Drew came out and asked her if she had seen Potterfield. She thought he meant coming in, but she rarely saw him come in because he used the back entrance. Drew meant leaving."

"So Potterfield was at Drew's that morning?"

"A lot of mornings. Old friends. His being there was nothing unusual. But she said that something happened that day. Potterfield had been at Drew's office, but had slipped out while Drew was seeing a patient. She said he had her calling Potterfield's office every five minutes or so. He was upset."

"Why was Drew upset?"

"She didn't know. But he cancelled his other appointments."

"Before Potterfield is shot. Before Mrs. Potterfield calls him to tell him Potterfield was shot, he cancels his appointments." Ginger nodded.

"I know what Marvyn will think," said Adam.

They called him.

"Told you so," said Fat Chance. "Drew's the secret honey."

Adam was afraid that he was right. "When you talk to the security guards, see what they think about Drew."

"Drew was setting it up, maybe," said Fat Chance. "Calls Potterfield over, reveals the affair, sends him home to be shot in the privacy of his own bedroom?"

"Don't assume," said Ginger on the extension. "Find out. And talk to the maitre d' at the luncheon. See what he remembers about Mrs. Potterfield. And supper is at six sharp. Don't be late."

Fat Chance laughed before he hung up.

"Late for a free meal?" asked Adam. "Surely you jest."

Ginger took one last look in the mirror. "Well," she said, "I hope I'm back from the doctor in time to fix it. Damn. I'll probably have to see Tasker."

"Is that the kid?" asked Adam.

She nodded. "It's probably good, though. He likes to talk, even though most of it is condescending. Maybe it's good."

"You're not being very convincing," Adam said.

Ginger smiled.

She wasn't smiling when she got back.

It wasn't Tasker so much, she said, though Adam could see that it was. "It wasn't *just* Tasker, anyway," she said. "It's all of it. I hate it all."

Adam didn't know what to

say. "Potterfield was a good man."

"That's not what I mean," said Ginger. Her hands moved in quick little jerks. "It's that mask again. I played dumb. I gossiped. I used the bait of falsehood to catch the carp of truth. I might as well be back in TV."

Adam brought them both a cup of tea and some short-breads. He made a fuss about pouring and serving to stall a minute or two. "So," he said finally, with some hesitation, not wanting to seem too eager for the carp, "so, you found out something then?"

She *had* found out something, though she was angry as she went over it, angry with herself, with Tasker, with, Adam feared, him.

She had sat waiting, she said, had sat stripped and gowned, feet in stirrups of the exam table, while Tasker took his own sweet time being imperious and chatty with the nurses by turns as he flitted among the other rooms with other women sitting spraddled and vulnerable and angry. A nurse had finally stuck her head in and apologized, saying that Chambers and Barney were in surgery and that everybody was running behind. And Ginger had seized that opportunity, saying to the nurse that she sure missed Dr. Potterfield, and seeing the

nurse hesitate, adding how she'd always felt cared for with him, you know, never felt like just a check or a Blue Cross card.

"But that's true," said Adam. "You do feel that way."

"The way I used it was a lie," she snapped. "Don't try to soften it, Adam. I've got to face what I'm doing here."

The nurse had gotten teary, had blown her nose on one of those scratchy generic tissues found only in exam rooms. She missed him, too. He was so kind. He never yelled. He treated nurses like people instead of ninnies. Ginger said she had been in the waiting room when they got the news, even though she hadn't been, and she thought they'd done a wonderful job of handling the news to the patients, considering. The nurse said thanks, that it had been hard, but she'd been prepared in a way since he'd just walked out of the office without saying anything or leaving a number, and Dr. Drew had called so many times that day that they knew something was the matter. "And he hadn't been himself in months," she added. "It was like he wasn't here. Like he had something on his mind all the time."

Then Tasker had come in and snapped that the nurse was needed in Room 5 and to quit yakking on office time. Ginger apologized, said it was her fault,

said that she had been asking questions and that the nurse had kindly answered. And then, as Tasker began his exam, she brought up the death, said how sorry, how sad. Tasker seemed irritated.

"Yeah, we're going to miss the old guy," he said. "More work for us all. Well, not that much. He hadn't been pulling his weight around here for a while." And he went on, for some reason, perhaps because he'd heard them talking so warmly about Potterfield, Ginger thought, perhaps because he resented Potterfield's rapport, resented the resentment he himself received from patients and nurses. Potterfield, Tasker said, hadn't been much help in the office for months, had been distant, distracted, out of it. They'd been covering for him. Tasker thought maybe he was getting in the drug cabinet, but he kept a close watch and it wasn't that. Of course Potterfield could have been writing prescriptions for whatever he wanted, but Tasker didn't think it was a chemical thing. "He was confused. Getting old. Senile, maybe. It was like he had lost something. Anyway, how are we feeling today?"

Ginger said she had somehow gotten through the exam without screaming at him.

Adam's tea was lukewarm.

"What do you think?"

Ginger shook her head. "Nothing, yet. I'm letting it all just sit there. I don't want to think about it. Let me concentrate on supper."

By six o'clock Fat Chance hadn't shown up. Adam called his office. He wasn't there.

They held supper until seven thirty, then ate without him.

They called Ruth. She hadn't seen him, but he almost never came home before nine or ten, they knew how busy he was all the time. He'd call tomorrow, they decided at ten. They watched TV, showered, got into bed. They tried to read.

But Adam was worried. They were dealing, perhaps, with killers, however gentle or genteel they appeared, and killers by definition were desperate. "Do you think maybe he's in trouble?" he asked finally.

Fat Chance came in then, came weaving in, pleased with himself and oblivious to their stony disapproval. He had had a few beers with Sam the Security Guard. Wonderful man, Sam. Hell of a talker. Just a couple of beers, deductible, business expense, just a couple. And the news was that Sam the Security Guard agreed about Drew. Sam the Guard thought Dr. Drew had gotten to the scene PDQ. Sam said that Drew had raised some stink with EMS over who was going to take the

body where, but the coroner said autopsy and told EMS to transport to County and his lab. Drew hadn't been happy.

"And Drew was the phone call that got Mrs. Potterfield to leave the luncheon early. The waiter knew. He wrote Drew's name on a note and carried it on a silver tray to Mrs. P." Fat Chance's face went lopsided with a grin. "I think we got our man. He makes phone calls all day to Potterfield, he calls the wife, he's the first on the scene almost, he bitches at the coroner. A good day's work. I think I'll become a private eye." He tilted over on the couch as if he intended to make it his bed. Ginger and Adam tilted him back up and took his keys from him. Adam said he'd drive him home. Fat Chance protested mightily. Ginger said that Adam would drive him home, period. Fat Chance said thanks.

"What will Ruth say?" asked Ginger as she opened the passenger side door of her VW bug for Fat Chance.

"Ruth's an angel," he said. "An angel."

"So was Lucifer," Adam muttered, but Fat Chance didn't hear.

Adam missed his Studebaker. He hated driving the bug, hated that emptiness under the hood instead of the solid weight of an engine block sitting like a shield between him

and whatever maniac out there was waiting to smash him in. It was a test every time he ventured out, a rite of passage, especially at night, when the partiers were on the road, and the high school cruisers, when idiots could run at him with one headlight only, or sometimes none. He made Fat Chance wear his seat belt.

He waved goodbye to Ginger and eased out of the driveway into the street and had gone only half a block when Fat Chance screamed at him to stop. If they hadn't been buckled in, they would have smacked the windshield, and before Adam knew what was happening, Fat Chance was out of the door and weaving to the car parked across the street. There was somebody in it.

"Oh, lord," Adam muttered, pulling the Volkswagen to the curb. Fat Chance was tapping on the driver's window. The man was in the passenger seat.

"Hey, buddy," Fat Chance was yelling. "Hey, buddy."

Adam took his elbow and pulled. "Come on, Marvyn."

Fat Chance popped his elbow free and tapped again. "Hey. Hey, buddy."

The man was just staring at them. Adam gave him a sheepish grin and a shrug. Fat Chance started around to the passenger side. "*Marvyn!*" Adam yelled.

The passenger window was

down. Fat Chance leaned on a forearm toward the passenger, who in turn was leaning back as far as he could without toppling over. "Hey, buddy," Fat Chance said. "You got the time?"

Adam tried to smile. "He's had a little too much," he said, pulling at Fat Chance's arm. "Sorry. Come on, Marvyn."

"Got the time?" Fat Chance repeated.

"It's eleven thirty-nine," snapped Adam.

"Thanks," said Fat Chance to the man, giving him a little salute. "Thanks." He started weaving back to the Volkswagen, Adam's guiding hand under his elbow. Adam stuffed him into the passenger side and ordered him to buckle up. Fat Chance was giggly and fumbly. The man in the car pretended to ignore them. Adam was mortified.

When the engine started Fat Chance quit giggling, and a block down the road he seemed suddenly sober. "You smell 'em?" he said.

"What?" said Adam, wishing he'd listened to Ginger when she said not to get involved. "*What?*"

"The french fries. They sit in the passenger side like that because it's less suspicious since it looks like they're waiting for the driver, but hell's bells, Dr. Clay, it's going on midnight and the car smells like french

fries. Who are they trying to kid?"

Adam clenched the wheel. "If you ever," he said very slowly, "ever show up at my house drunk again . . ."

"I'm not drunk."

Adam looked at him in the blue streak of a passing street light. Fat Chance was sitting upright, looking composed.

Fat Chance smiled. "You got a sitter." Adam stared.

"A sitter," Fat Chance said. "Stakeout. Been there for a while, long enough to eat his french fries. Somebody's watching the house. We maybe stepped in something here."

They drove around the block. The car was gone. They pulled to the curb to make sure they weren't being followed. If they were, they couldn't tell it. Fat Chance was clearly sober now, so Adam drove back home. They both went in to tell Ginger.

"It wasn't Drew," said Fat Chance. "I've seen his picture. I don't know who that was."

Scenes from bad movies flashed through Adam's mind. Mafiosi. Enforcers. Hit men. He had visions of fleeing across a map of the United States, pursued by dark cars and men in dark suits.

"This is great," said Fat Chance gleefully.

Adam stared in disbelief.

Fat Chance was grinning. "We're really close."

"Yeah," said Adam, "yeah, but a hit man. Marvyn . . ."

"Nah, a P.I. Hit man? Adam. Guy was a P.I. Had to be."

"How do you know that?" asked Adam, eager to be convinced.

"Not a cop. Potterfield can't call the cops and complain we're harassing her because then they might start looking into the case again. Not a hit man because this is not TV. Not a friend of Potterfield, not a civilian, because the guy was sitting in the passenger side, which is a stakeout trick the pros use. Gotta be a P.I."

"We're not in danger, then."

"Nah, we made him. He won't be back. And now that we know they're there, it'll make it harder for them to do what they do."

Adam let out the breath he didn't know he was holding.

"But," Fat Chance said, "don't let anybody in you don't know."

"I don't understand why they hired a private detective," said Ginger.

Fat Chance lifted his shoulders. "Not like we're doing something they could find out by watching. Maybe intimidate us?"

"It worked," said Adam.

"Possible," said Ginger. "But for what? What good will it do?"

"Would a murderer hire a private detective?" asked Adam.

"Meaning?" said Ginger.

"We don't know what we're dealing with. It could be a detective, it could be a thug, it could be just somebody waiting for the driver in a car that smelled like french fries. But it could be trouble."

Ginger nodded slowly. "Right. Still." She thought a minute. "Well, I don't see what this changes. There's nothing else to do except keep going, is there?"

"They want us to stop," said Adam. "It's not worth the risk. Why don't we just stop?"

Ginger said that if even they stopped, it wouldn't matter. They couldn't just call Mrs. Potterfield and say that they had stopped. And stopping wouldn't change what they knew. If they knew something, they knew it.

"But if it happens again, we call the police," Ginger said. "We may call them tomorrow anyway. Okay?"

They agreed to sleep on it.

But Adam couldn't sleep. He felt too vulnerable asleep. He spent the night in the living room, peeking from behind the curtain at the street, amazed at how many noises the house made when he listened in the dark.

Looking in the mirror, Adam tried to straighten his neck again. He couldn't do it. The crick

was too painful. The cant to his head was just enough to make him look like a slightly puzzled and querulous owl. He deserved it, he felt, for being foolish. He had fallen asleep in the wing-back chair.

The garage called. Brunhilde was ready. Adam didn't dare ask how much.

Fat Chance came over at mid-morning, already late to work, but he gave no sign of suffering from the excesses of the previous night. And he had it all figured out.

"Affair between Drew and the wife. Been going on a while. Potterfield suspects, but can't prove it, but it's on his mind all the time. Drew starts getting nervous because he knows Potterfield suspects. Somehow Potterfield finds out. He goes to Drew's office and confronts him, maybe even threatens him. Or maybe they try to talk things out, but it doesn't work. Potterfield leaves. Now Drew's even more nervous. He tries to find Mrs. Potterfield. Finally finds her at luncheon. 'He knows,' he tells her. 'I've tried to call him. He's not at office, not at home.' 'He may go home,' she says. 'I'll go there. You try to find him here.' She goes home, finds him."

He paused for some coffee and, forgetting himself, reached into his coat for a cigar.

"Marvyn," said Ginger.

He put the cigar back. "Let's

put the best light on it. Let's say she gets home and he's abusive. The more they talk, the louder he yells. He gets the gun. He threatens her. She tries to take the gun. Or, maybe he gets physical and she gets the gun to protect herself. Either way, the doc gets shot. So then what? Who to call? She doesn't know. She calls Drew. Drew says, 'Make it look like a burglary and call the cops. I'll be right over.'

Adam and Ginger sat in silence for a while. Adam found the scenario dishearteningly plausible. He wished that Fat Chance was not so often right about the nature of things.

"Even if that's true," said Adam slowly, "what do we do? We can't prove any of this."

Ginger stood and began gathering cups and spoons. "Maybe we go to the police. We don't have much, and there's probably nothing they can do, but we were threatened and there was someone watching the house. Maybe that will be enough to get them to reopen the case. Is your neck okay?"

Adam tried to nod. The motion was more sideways than up and down. "When do we tell the police. Now?"

Ginger shook her head. "I don't know. Let Marvyn run me out to get Brunhilde. Then we'll have lunch and talk about it. I

don't like any of this." She seemed tired.

So Adam stayed home with more coffee and the twins and a heating pad. The twins were in a neck-wrenchingly playful mood. He tried to get them to watch TV, feeling better able to deal with his conscience than his neck.

To his distress he found that Big Bird and Ernie and company were long since over for the morning, but the twins seemed content with whatever game show was on. Adam told himself that he shouldn't be letting two-year-olds watch that kind of drivel, that he should get up from the chair, leave the heating pad and pillow and coffee and book where they were, cut the television off, and romp around a bit with the girls. He kept telling himself that until he drifted off.

He dreamed of the possibilities of early retirement. That was possible only if he came suddenly into some money, so he dreamed also of winning the game shows the twins had watched. He dreamed a doorbell was ringing.

A doorbell *was* ringing.

He was struggling to get up before he was fully awake. He stumbled across the living room to the front door and twisted at the lock a few times before getting it to work. He opened the

door. On his front porch was Edna Potterfield.

She stood, a dark presence, solid, iron. She was no dream. For an eternity they simply stared.

"Mr. Clay, what do you want from me?"

Adam stood dumbstruck. He had no answer.

"May I come in, please?" It was not a request, but not a command either. It was a formula of civilized behavior. It reminded Adam that he was neglecting his duty and the person to whom that duty was owed. Adam was embarrassed.

"Please," he said, stepping aside and opening the screen door with his left hand.

She came in, walked close to Adam as she passed him. The hem of her dress brushed the pants bagging at Adam's knees. The crick made his head tilt sideways. He felt unkempt and absurd.

She sat on the couch. She tried to sit in the same position as she had sat in the interview, the impervious rigidity, but the couch was soft and sagging and made that impossible. She had to sit back. In that position she sat as straight as she could, then said again, "What is it that you want?"

Adam still had no answer, had nothing to say. His mind scurried in circles while his

face, he knew, wore the appearance of that faint half smile it always wore. He didn't know what to do. He sat.

"I have money?" she said. It sounded like a question. "How much?" She leaned forward, then shifted her weight and slid to the edge of the couch. She opened her handbag. She started pulling out stacks of money and laying them on the coffee table, neat little banded stacks of twenties with "\$500" on each band. She pulled out ten, twelve, fifteen. She looked right at him. "You seemed to be a nice man." She sounded disappointed, as if at a failure. "Is this enough? I have more." He saw then that her fingers were trembling, that she was coiled on the edge of hysteria. She might start screaming, or worse . . . If she killed her husband, she might . . .

"How much more?" she asked. Her voice was breaking. "What do you want from me?"

There were voices outside. The door opened and Fat Chance and Ginger were in the room. Adam was aware that they were saying something but the words were just sounds, and the sounds themselves broke off when Fat Chance and Ginger recognized their visitor. At the sight of them, Mrs. Potterfield began to weep. There was no sobbing, only a constant stream. *Like*

Niobe, Adam thought, *all tears*. "What do you want from me?" she said. It was a plea.

Fat Chance finally broke the silence. "We want you to go to the police and tell them what happened."

That would work, thought Adam. *That would solve it*.

"No. Oh no, I couldn't do that. No." Her head was down, shaking, as if in disbelief at the money.

"You've got to."

"Please take the money. Take it. I can get more." She pushed the little stacks across the table, toward them, away from her. They were all standing. She looked small and doll-like on the couch.

"Mrs. Potterfield," Ginger began, "we don't want . . ."

There was a sharp knock, a bang, and the door swung open and Dr. Drew stood in the doorway. He hesitated, then pushed through them to the couch.

"Edna," he said, ignoring them. "Edna. What are you doing here? You must come with me." He had an arm around her shoulders.

"I've got to make them understand. Make them take the money, Jonathan."

He stood, snarling. "What's the matter with you people? Why can't you leave her alone?" It was the voice from the telephone.

"Just go to the police, Mrs.

Potterfield," said Ginger. "That's all we want."

"You don't know what you're asking," said Drew. He tried to help Mrs. Potterfield off the couch.

Adam felt panicky, wanted them out, out now. Two murderers, maybe, angry in his living room. Good Lord. "I'm calling the police."

"No, no," she cried. "You can't. You just don't know."

"We know enough," said Adam. "If there was a reason, that's for the courts to decide. I hope there was a reason. But you killed your husband, and you must go to the police."

Mrs. Potterfield's face went blank, as if someone had struck her, as if nothing made anything even close to sense. Then in her face Adam saw a sudden flash of, of . . . relief, he thought. Relief and a sudden burst of tears.

She sank down to the couch, sobbing. "Oh, yes," she said. "Oh, yes. I killed him. I killed him. Jonathan, I killed him."

"She seems real sorry now," said Fat Chance. "Too late." He looked over to Adam in victory. They had done it. She had confessed.

But Adam looked at Ginger and saw in her eyes the same doubt he felt. They had been wrong all along.

Ginger bent over Mrs. Potterfield and put a hand on her

shoulder. "I'm afraid there has been a most terrible mistake," she said. She began picking up the stacks of money and pushing them deep into Mrs. Potterfield's handbag. Adam saw her flinch. "I'd like to talk to you." With an arm around her, Ginger brought her to her feet and steered her toward the study. "Adam, talk to Dr. Drew."

Drew protested and started to follow, but Fat Chance blocked the way.

"Please be seated, Dr. Drew," said Adam, displaying more coolness and control than he felt, seemingly calm, writhing inside.

Drew stood with his fists clenched. "I want to know what the hell is going on," he said in a low voice. "I have a man outside . . ."

"Yeah, big deal," said Fat Chance, "a P.I., what's he gonna do, come in and rough us up?"

Drew remained standing, silent.

Fat Chance turned to Adam. "What the hell is going on?"

Adam again asked Drew to sit, and when Drew refused, he himself sat anyway. "We were not persecuting Mrs. Potterfield. We certainly were not going to blackmail her. You must understand, Dr. Drew, that there were problems in the reports of the death of Dr. Potterfield. The official version, the breaking and entering story,

just wouldn't hold up. It was a fabrication. Naturally, Mrs. Potterfield becomes suspect."

"She couldn't . . ."

Adam raised his voice slightly. "You know what we thought. Let me tell you what I think now. I'll ask you to correct me where I'm wrong . . ."

"S he couldn't . . ." Fat Chance twirled his fork

impatiently, waiting for Ginger to come back from the kitchen so he could start his dessert. Adam almost told him to go ahead but changed his mind, thinking that Fat Chance wouldn't be hurt by a little restraint.

They could hear Ginger say goodbye and hang up the phone.

Adam leaned across the table. "Don't argue with her any more," he said in a low voice.

"Not my fault," Fat Chance said, fork poised.

"That was Dr. Drew," she said as she entered. "Calling to thank us again. That's *thank*, Marvyn."

Fat Chance popped a forkful of spice cake into his mouth. "He's welcome," he said around it.

Ginger slammed her fork down. "Damn it, Marvyn . . ."

"Look, sis," said Fat Chance, pointing with his fork. "The policy was less than two years old. The suicide clause was still

in effect. Acme doesn't have to pay. I feel bad about it, too, but hey, what can I do? You want to blame somebody, blame Drew. He should have stayed in the office with Potterfield after he told him. You don't tell your friend he's got a tumor in his head and then just leave him alone."

"He knows that now," said Ginger. "He feels guilty. He told me he's always given the patient a moment alone to collect himself. Now he realizes he was protecting himself, not the patient. He couldn't face the patient after giving such terrible news. But he'll stay from now on. That's part of being a doctor. Sometimes, Marvyn, you have to do things for people instead of for..."

"What amazes me," said Adam loudly, "is Mrs. Potterfield."

"Yeah," said Fat Chance. "Tough old bird.. Walk in, find her husband like that, have the cool to cover it up, fake a B and E. What did she do with the gun, you think?"

"Kept it," said Adam. "Kept it with the necklace and earrings."

Fat Chance put down his fork. "Where?"

Adam looked at Ginger. He could see that she didn't want to talk at all. He raised his eyebrows innocently.

Ginger sighed and leaned

back in her chair. "In her handbag. In that big brown handbag we always saw. We should have seen something there, a woman in black carrying a brown bag. Not by choice, I think. That day in her bedroom she dumped the gun and the jewels into her bag. But after, what does she do with them? Where can she hide them so they can never be found? She doesn't know. So she keeps them with her always. I don't think she could bring herself even to touch them. Especially the gun."

"You saw it when you put the money back," said Fat Chance.

"I felt it." She shuddered. "I think I know how she must have felt. I know how she felt, Marvyn. I know what a terrible thing she's been through. And it was all to protect her husband's name. That's not asking too much, is it? After all he's done for the community. But if you reopen this and try to prove suicide, you destroy everything she was trying to do."

"Not me, sis. Acme. I didn't make the rules. If it was suicide, it's not my fault."

"Marvyn..."

"There was no suicide," Adam said.

"What does that mean?" said Fat Chance.

"Was it Hamlet wronged Laertes? Dr. Potterfield didn't kill himself. Everybody saw the change—he wasn't himself, they said. He could tell that some-

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thing was affecting his motor functions—"Adam held out his hands at arms' length, spreading his fingers "—but it was affecting his cognitive functions, too. He literally wasn't himself. So he didn't kill himself. He was killed. Murdered by the tumor just as surely as if it had run its course."

"Nice," said Fat Chance, "but it won't stand up in court."

"You know," Ginger said slowly, "maybe it *really* wasn't suicide."

Fat Chance narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Pardon this at the table, Adam, but isn't it true, Marvin, that most male suicides using a gun shoot themselves in the head."

"So?" said Fat Chance warily.

"Well, then, I spent a lot of time in courtrooms when I was being a reporter, and it seems to me that if Mrs. Potterfield goes to court with Acme, which I for one would advise her to do, the location of the wound would argue against suicide. Statistics say it should have been in the head."

Fat Chance shrugged. "Statistics don't pull triggers."

"And a head shot . . ."

"Please," said Adam.

" . . . would have a certain poetic justice appeal to the jury. They'd think that's what he should have done. How appropriate for a man being killed by

a tumor in his head to end his life by putting a bullet through the tumor."

"I'm going to leave the table," said Adam.

"What do you think?" said Ginger, a note of triumph lifting her chin. "It isn't suicide until a jury says it is. How will Acme explain the location of the wound?"

"Easy," said Fat Chance. "What would you do, or you, Adam? You've just gotten the news. Couldn't be worse. Tumor. You come home, sit on your bed, get the gun out of the bedside table. You raise the gun to your head. You put it in your mouth or on your temple. Now what, Adam? You pull the trigger?"

Adam slowly shook his head.

"Why not?" said Fat Chance.

Adam looked at his wife. "I couldn't do that to Ginger."

"Exactly," said Fat Chance.

"So you lower the gun to your chest and fire." He smiled.

"That's how we explain the wound."

Silence fell over the table, heightened by the sound of Fat Chance's fork scaping the last threads of icing from his plate. "Good cake," he said. "Any more?"

"If I were the Potterfield lawyer," said Ginger, staring into the distance and speaking as if she were working her ideas out as she said them, "I'd argue

that the angle of entry was just too awkward. Wound just under sternum, ascending right to left. How do you deal with that? It doesn't work. Not a natural position to hold a gun."

"There is no natural position to hold a gun," said Adam.

"It works," said Fat Chance. He took his fork in both hands and bent the tines down to a ninety degree angle with the handle.

"*Marvyn!*" said Ginger. "That's my silver!"

"Hey, with the bonus from this case, I'll buy you a dozen." He held the fork like a gun and put it to his temple. "Now lookit. Natural position. Do I squeeze the trigger? No, can't do that to the little woman. Body shot, then. Lower the weapon. Just let your arm drop down naturally. Your palm rotates from vertical to horizontal, muzzle aiming right to left and up. And another thing. We're dealing with a medical man here. An amateur will put the gun on a rib on the left side and fire, either with his hand all twisted or holding the gun backwards and firing with his thumb. But the weapon here is a .22, and Potterfield knows that bone can deflect the bullet. He could shoot and not die. That's not what he wants either. He wants it straight through the heart, a soft tissue shot only."

"Could we be a little less

graphic, please?" said Adam.

"So he jams the gun here, right under his sternum. Gun sideways, palm up, perfectly natural position. Aim up. Bang. Right ventricle, left ventricle. Sorry, Adam."

"Aren't you arguing for a lot of cold reasoning from a man about to take his own life?" asked Adam.

"Drowners fold their clothes neatly on the beach. Jumpers take off their glasses. It all fits."

Ginger made one last attempt. "But if Mrs. Potterfield argues that her husband was murdered . . ."

"She won't," said Fat Chance. "Too much class for that."

Ginger sank back looking drained. Adam was making a gun out of his thumb and forefinger and trying different positions.

"See what I mean?" said Fat Chance.

"Accident," said Adam.

"What accident?" said Fat Chance.

"He must have debated. He sits on the bed, just sits there staring at it, looking at it, holding it. He points it at himself, points it away. Should I, shouldn't I, should I, shouldn't I? He puts it to his head. He can't do it there. Then he puts it to his chest, under his sternum, like you said. No, he thinks. No, I can't do it at all. And he's pulling the gun away

and the gun goes off. Maybe the phone ringing when Drew calls startles him. I mean, he was thinking about it. Who wouldn't? But maybe he didn't mean to do it."

Fat Chance snorted. "Never prove that."

"The powder burn was cone shaped, wasn't it?"

Fat Chance shrugged. "A short little cone, yeah. You'll get that when the surface is at an angle to the gun."

"But there shouldn't be even a small cone, should there? Isn't he going to jam the muzzle right into his skin? He's not going to hold it even an inch or two away, is he? Which would be very hard to do at that angle anyway if you wanted to aim well."

Ginger sat up. "Right. It should be a contact wound. It wasn't. Spread of powder burns consistent with pistol being fired away from the body." She clapped her hands. "Accident."

Fat Chance protested. "But we know . . ."

"Nothing," said Ginger. "We don't know anything. We'll never know. We can only guess."

Mrs. Potterfield have to prove what happened, or would she just have to show that it might have been an accident?"

"The official report still says 'killed by person or persons unknown,'" said Ginger. "Let it stay there. You should just drop it, Marvyn."

Fat Chance shifted uncomfortably. "Half a million is too much to lose. We'll take our chances."

"How about a million?" said Ginger. "I'll bet that policy had a double indemnity clause for accidental death. Which means if you take your chances and lose . . ."

Fat Chance had grown pale. "Maybe I'd better speak to the old man about this one."

"You'll drop it?" said Ginger.

"I'm not saying that," said Fat Chance gruffly.

Ginger was smiling. "Thank you, Marvyn. I knew you wouldn't do it."

She held out her hand for his plate. "More spice cake?"

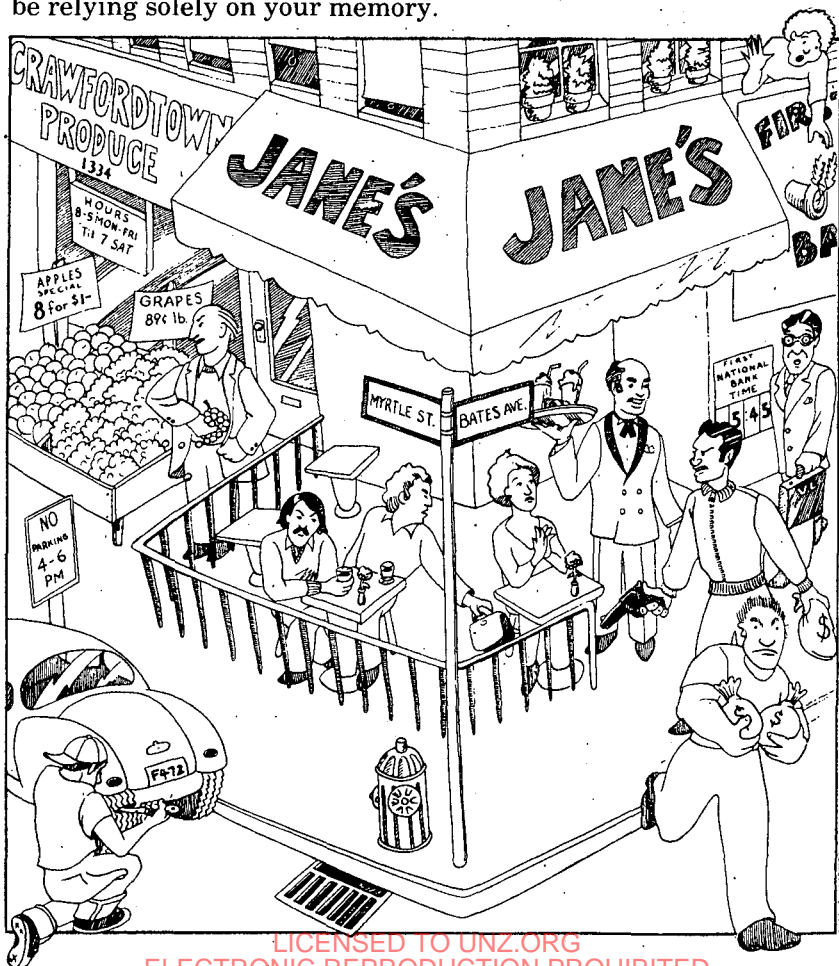
"No thanks," said Fat Chance, leaning on the table and dropping his chin glumly into his hand. "I'm not hungry."

UNSOLVED

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the January issue.

Study this picture carefully for three minutes . . . then turn the page for questioning by the police. Observe carefully, since you'll be relying solely on your memory.



In the rather busy street scene on the previous page, you were witness to one robbery, four misdemeanors, and an approaching calamity. The police would like your firsthand account of what happened, so please answer the following questions as precisely as possible.

1. What time was it by the bank clock? _____
2. What day of the week was it? _____
3. What was the name of the outdoor café? _____
4. On what street was its entrance? _____
5. How many thieves were staging the holdup? _____
6. Were they armed? _____
7. How many bags of loot were they carrying? _____
8. Was the thief in the street wearing a hat? _____
9. How many people, besides you and the holdup men, were at the scene of the robbery? _____
10. What were the initials of the man in the business suit? _____
11. What immediate danger was he in? _____
12. Was the onlooker from the second floor a man or a woman?

13. What store was next door to the café? _____
14. On what street was its entrance? _____
15. What was the shopper stealing? _____
16. What was the license number of the car parked in front of the store? _____
17. Why was it illegally parked? _____
18. What part of the car was being vandalized? _____
19. What offense was being committed against the lady diner?

20. Was there a police phone at the corner? _____

BONUS: Please identify the holdup men from this lineup.



A



B



C



D



E

See page 134 for the solution to the December puzzle.

FICTION

Little Friends
and Big Junior
by Bruce Scates



There was a single room, to let.

There were two young men who arrived on the rooming house's stoop at the same moment, wearing smiles for their prospective landlady, frowns for each other.

Responding to the pressed doorbell, their landlady was the picture of ideal landladyhood—almost. That is, she was small and neat, had gray hair, a round pink face, twinkling eyes, an apron, a *soupcçon* of aroma of strawberry pie baking, and announced a miraculously low rent.

Perfect. Except . . .

She asked each of them to take turns picking up one end of her piano. Not together. One young man at a time. With a kind of flutteringly *helpless* twinkling, she explained, "You see, I have to have a *teensy* bit of lifting done from time to time, and—well, mercy me, I must really and truly *insist* that my lodger *help* me." She smiled at them tentatively, full of hope. Wafting strawberry pie aroma.

The first young man—a very thin young man with an immense Adam's apple and noisy kneecaps—could barely budge the piano. Wheezing, his face red, he was shown, with profuse and nearly tearful regrets, to the door.

It was the other young man's turn.

He lifted the end of the piano easily.

"Well, goodness gracious, you *are* strong!" the landlady, whose name was Mrs. Edie Clifford (a widow), exclaimed.

The young man, whose name was Andy Maddox, smiled modestly.

Mrs. Clifford's eyes twinkled even more as she examined Andy. He often had this twinkling effect on women's eyes. For one thing, there was a lot of Andy to twinkle at. He was six feet five inches tall, weighed two hundred and fifty pounds, and was good at lifting things: chiefly barbells, but also the occasional female in distress—or cow, piano, or small automobile in distress. He was currently a weight-lifting instructor at a Washington, D.C., fitness center, and only recently arrived from a southern Virginia farm. He had red hair, a nicely chiselled, open face, a cheerful smile, a sweet temper, and an inferiority complex. The latter was because he thought he was . . . well, *dumb*. One of the reasons he thought he was dumb was because his mother had taught him to believe that people were basically *good* and because the Boy Scouts had taught him to be honest, truthful, clean, helpful, etc.—and he *was*, and

everyone said, "You *dope*."

But Edie Clifford twinkled at him and said, "You're *perfect*!"

And Andy moved into Mrs. Clifford's and they lived happily ever after.

Or at least until the first occasion when Andy was called on to do a teensy bit of lifting.

At two thirty A.M. in the morning.

When Andy stumbled from his bed and opened the door in answer to her tapping, Edie stood outside. Dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. She asked, in a tremulous voice, "Could you please lift a little something for me, my dear? Right now? In the garage?"

Dressed, he followed her down to her cellar and into the connecting garage.

"If you could just get it into the van?" she said.

It was an oblong wooden box approximately six feet by two and a half feet.

"Gosh," said Andy, staring at the box.

"It's a Russian," Edie said.

"A Russian?"

"A wolfhound," said Edie.

"A wolfhound?"

"A *dog*," said Edie, her voice breaking. "A dear *departed* Russian wolfhound," she added, dabbing again.

"Departed?"

"*Dead*," said Edie. "That nice Mr. Bunch's beloved Creepsy.

Mr. Bunch just sent him around and asked me to take Creepsy. He said Creepsy always liked the country, you see. All those trees."

"Take him—?"

Edie widened her watery sentimental eyes. "I run a small pet cemetery out in the country? For the little friends of my friends?" Her voice quavered. "Doggies and kitties that have passed on? The occasional parrot also." She sighed. "I have a special client, who's Mr. Albert Bunch. That poor man, shoot, he has just the worst luck with his little pals. One after another. Pfffft! Sometimes two or three a month." She blew her nose. "One thing Mr. Bunch absolutely insists on is that I bury them right after they've passed on, which happens to be always in the middle of the night, but, bless his soul, he provides caskets roomy and nice enough for family." She sniffed. "Always big dogs. Mr. Bunch seems to like his doggies hefty, but boy oh boy, the poor things certainly are unhealthy."

Andy liked dogs himself. He lifted and slid the oblong wooden box into the back of Edie's van. Respectfully. Just as if it was his own dog.

"My dear, could I ask you one more great big favor? Could you come with me? To the . . . the final resting place? I think it's

what Creepsy would have wanted."

More than an hour later, after leaving Washington and its suburbs, and then multi-lane highways and a series of rural roads behind, and finally bumping down a dirt and gravel road, the van's headlights shone on a farmhouse.

A dark farmhouse. It was almost four A.M.

Mrs. Clifford rummaged in her purse. "Oh no! I forgot my keys!" She sounded dismayed. "I'll have to wake Charlie. Gosh, Charlie'll be mad enough to spit!"

A big bully, thought Andy.

"Charlie" answered Edie's timid knocking with a scowl, a printed robe with what looked to Andy like drawings of slugs on it, and a shotgun. Also with a feminine gender.

"I might have known," "Charlie" said, still scowling. "At this damn hour." She grumbled: "*Mother*." She added, "With another mutt."

Charlie was about Andy's age, but a good foot or more shorter, with chopped dark hair, a round and brown face, a pursed mouth, and black eyes that didn't twinkle like her mother's. They crackled.

Her scowl went into a kind of overdrive when she noticed Andy. Noticed Andy staring at her. She said, "Did this thing fall off a logging truck?" She

added, "I don't mean a logger, either."

A little bully, thought Andy. She lowered her shotgun. "I suppose redwood spruce here is supposed to dig the hole?"

"Andy, would you?" blinked Edie. "For poor Creepsy's sake?"

"It would be a privilege, Mrs. Clifford," said Andy, sincerely, innocently, Boy Scoutishly.

Charlie delivered a sarcastic snort. "I take that back about redwood spruce," she said. "Definitely mineral, not vegetable. I'll go get dressed."

Andy didn't think he really cared for Charlie. He didn't think he could ever really care for someone who had pictures of *slugs* on their robes. He just didn't like snail-type animals.

When Charlie came back, she had on jeans, boots, and a T-shirt with pictures of slugs on it. It was no improvement on the robe, in Andy's opinion.

"Do you want a shovel or will you just use your paws?" she said to Andy, who had risen above the slugs and produced a friendly smile.

Andy expressionlessly followed her to the barn. She waved him his choice of shovels. She also said, "You're staring at my slugs."

Andy reddened. "Gee, I'm sorry."

She glared. "I happen to think slugs are *cute*."

Andy said, "Really?"

She said, "I *draw* slugs."

Andy said, "That's interesting."

She said, "For children's books. For my *Slapsie the Slug* series."

Andy was impressed. "You're a real published author?"

She said, "Hah!" She added through gritted teeth, "Would you be dumb enough to publish a kid's book with a slimy, repulsive, disgusting *slug* as a hero?" She snapped, "Of course not!" She exploded, "NO ONE WANTS TO PUBLISH SLUG BOOKS!"

She thrust a shovel at Andy. "*Here!*" Charlie stamped out of the barn, grabbing a Coleman lantern as she went. "Come on!"

Andy didn't think he cared for her temper, either.

The pet cemetery was a quarter of a mile from the house, on the other side of a hill, in a field bordered by woods. Around the field, Charlie's lantern gleamed on two dozen or more small markers. Some of these said things like "Skippy" and "Snowball" and "Goblin." Andy supposed they belonged to the pets of Mrs. Clifford and those of her relatives and friends. Some of the markers said, "Tony the Elephant," "Larry the Limp," "Sam the Twist," and "Boo the Bat." Andy had a feeling these belonged to Mr. Albert Bunch's little friends. Mr. Bunch had kind of an unusual taste in naming dogs.

While Andy dug the grave for "Creepsy"—Mr. Bunch insisted each be six feet deep—Charlie, in answer to his questions, grudgingly told him that it was her late father who had originally bought the farm and started the pet cemetery, chiefly for the pets of his close friends. And particularly his boss, Mr. Bunch, for whom he had been a bookkeeper.

When the grave was ready, Andy drove the van carrying Mrs. Clifford and Creepsy across the field and up to the gravesite.

Edie announced that she'd like to deliver a little service.

Charlie said, "I don't have time for this sloppy mush."

Clearing her throat, Edie said, "This is something I liked in a book I read once."

She began the Royal Navy's Service for Burial at Sea.

Suddenly there was a stifled sob.

Andy looked up. A pair of tears were plopping down Charlie's cheeks. Her chin was quivering. Gee . . .

Edie finished yielding Creepsy to the Deep. Clearing her throat once more, she began to recite a poem she had composed for the occasion. She said it was inspired by Joyce Kilmer's "Trees."

"*I think that I shall never see/A Russian wolfhound as pretty as Creepsy . . .*" she declared.

A loud, a hopelessly ineffectually stifled sob burst from Charlie. Tears gushed. Her shoulders heaved.

Andy stared at her. Open-mouthed. Astonished. HER? Also wondering if he should offer her his handkerchief? Maybe a shoulder to—

"Shut up, Redwood!"

"I didn't—"

"You *looked* like you were going to." Charlie scrubbed at her eyes with her knuckles. "Dammit." She sniffed loudly. "I'm always this way." She glowered. "You should see me at slug funerals!"

With another loud sniff and a mumbled "Oh hell," Charlie turned and stamped off up the hill toward the house.

Driving back to Washington in the van, Edie said, "Don't mind Charlie."

Andy said, "She's kind of an unusual person."

"She's a Deeply Embittered Person, that's what kind of person she is. She's a Great Artist but nobody knows it. You know why?"

"She draws slugs?"

"Perfect, detailed, life-like, *beautiful* pictures of slugs. But who wants to look at perfect, detailed, life-like, beautiful pictures of slugs? *Nobody*. The publishers say, 'Draw us bunnies, draw us fawns, give us baby chicks, give us *cute!*' And

you know what Charlie gives them?"

"Slugs?"

"Perfect, detailed, life-like, *beautiful* slugs. And with those beautiful slugs, well, mercy me, if we didn't have the farm and what nice Mr. Bunch sends us for burying his little friends, she'd perfectly *starve* to death."

Andy's forehead wrinkled and he appeared to be engaged in heavy concentration. "Mrs. Clifford, has she ever," he asked after several minutes, "has she ever thought of drawing bunnies, fawns, baby chicks, or otherwise cute animals?"

"She *can't!*" said Edie. "Charlie's got a *Cute Animal Complex!* The poor thing can't bring herself to draw cute-type animals. Bunnies, fawns, baby chicks—her brush freezes up in her hand, stiff as a *board*. All she can draw are slugs, vultures, warthogs, your homelier toads—that kind of thing. She once worked up to a mole. But it made her break out in hives."

"That's terrible!" said Andy, his deeply sympathetic nature stirred.

"Thank heavens we've got the pet cemetery and Mr. Bunch," sighed Edie.

Not long after they returned to Mrs. Clifford's house, the telephone rang. Edie asked Andy to answer. A voice rasped: "Did ya plant the Creeper?"

"You mean Creepsy?" said Andy.

"That's the stiff. Ya better have him where the sun don't shine, am I right?"

"Well, we *buried* Creepsy."

"Couldn't of happened to a bigger squealer," said the voice, chuckling.

"Wolfhound," said Andy. "A Russian wolfhound."

"*Got ya,*" said the voice. "Heh heh heh."

The telephone clicked.

Andy told Edie that Mr. Bunch seemed to be taking Creepsy's death well. She said, "You have to admire that man. He *always* does."

Five minutes later, the telephone rang again. Andy answered it.

"*Is the little dear pushing up daisies?*"

"Wolfhound," said Andy. "A Russian wolfhound."

"*Right,*" said the voice. "Heh heh heh."

It was a different chuckler from the first chuckler. A not-quite-as-warm-a-human-being chuckler, Andy felt.

"Let me tell you, it's wonderful work you're doing," the voice said. "And you'll get your reward for it one of these days. Real soon. Count on it."

The telephone clicked dead before Andy could thank the caller.

A couple of days later the

mail brought an exceedingly generous check from Mr. Albert Bunch for the disposal of Creepsy.

It also brought a package for Andy. Inside was a T-shirt. A T-shirt with a drawing of a large slug on it. The slug was wearing a snappy fedora and underneath it said: "Slapsie the Slug."

There was also a note. It said: "I've got a rotten disposition. Sorry." It also said: "*Wear it!*" There was a postscript: "Okay. You *don't* have to wear it."

Reading it, Andy could see Charlie's determined little chin and crackling eyes and blunt, spiky hair. Her pugnacious fierceness. Her . . .

Hmmmm . . .

A month later Mr. Albert Bunch had another loss. A Newfoundland retriever. A really big Newfoundland retriever. Delivered to Edie's in a seven foot oblong wooden box. A two hundred and seventy pound Newfoundland. A glandular Newfoundland.

When Edie and Andy took it out to the pet cemetery, Andy wore the Slapsie the Slug T-shirt.

While Andy was digging the grave by the light of her lantern, Charlie said in an even voice, "You're wearing my shirt."

"It's—"

"God," she said, "even on a gorgeous hunk like you it looks . . . *absolutely disgusting!*"

"Well, I don't know—" Andy began. He was a little thrown by that "gorgeous hunk." What did she mean by *that*? Was she being sarcastic? Or . . .

Suddenly her chin quivered. Tears started to trickle down her cheeks.

That threw him even more. "Look, it's my favorite," he babbled, "it's cotton, it doesn't grip under the arms, it's tumble dry, it—"

"Goddamit, it was a sweet, thoughtful, wonderful thing to do!"

"I had to wear *something* and—"

"Hush up, Redwood. I meant Mr. Bunch. Sending Big Tiny here." (Big Tiny was the New-foundland's name.)

"Oh," Andy said.

Charlie smiled crookedly. "Thanks anyway for wearing that stupid shirt."

Andy grinned sweetly, innocently, gorgeous hunkishly at her.

She scowled and mumbled, "Damn, damn, damn."

She *kept* throwing him.

Edie conducted another graveside service. This time she had a new poem: "*I think that I shall never see/A New-*

foundland as pretty as Big Tiny . . ."

Andy had forgotten how *she* was at pet funerals.

Afterwards, Andy said to Charlie, "It sure was nice seeing you again and thanks for the shirt."

She said, "Butter wouldn't melt in your goddam mouth, would it?" Immediately she clapped the heel of her palm to her forehead. "Sorry, sorry, *sorry!*" She muttered, "Damn, damn, *damn!*"

Soon after Edie and Andy got back to Edie's house, the telephone rang. Andy answered it.

"*Big Tiny—is he gone but not forgotten?*" The same voice as the other time. The *first* voice.

"We gave him just what he deserved," said Andy.

"That makes *two* of us who gave him what he deserved, kid. Heh heh heh."

The telephone clicked dead.

Five minutes later the second voice called.

"Big Tiny put away nice and cozy and quiet?" the voice asked.

Andy said yes.

"Heh heh heh."

In the next two and a half months Edie and Andy went out to the farm four times. Once with a Lhasa apso. Twice to put fresh flowers on the graves. Once to surprise Charlie on her birthday.

The rhyme scheme for the Lhasa apso practically killed Edie.

The Lhasa apso itself practically killed Andy. It was as heavy as a horse. What did Mr. Bunch feed his dogs?

The birthday practically killed Charlie.

Scowl. Grin. Scowl. Grin. Scowl. Grin.

Sniff.

Damn.

Afterwards, Edie said she hadn't seen Charlie so cheerful since she had started drawing those darn slugs.

Edie herself was a little cranky, at least for her. She was still upset about what had happened on that rhyme scheme for the Lhasa apso.

The next visit *everybody* was in a good mood until the giant schnauzer started talking.

Andy had the grave dug and the oblong wooden box was resting next to the grave and Edie was consigning "Sam the Slam" to the Deep.

When the giant schnauzer said, "Are you crazy?"

And pointed a gun at them.

While sitting up suddenly in the box, pushing the lid up.

Andy and the two Cliffords stared at the gun and the jack-in-the-box holding it, and Charlie said to Andy, "*Don't you dare black out on me!*"

That threw Andy, too.

The occupant of the oblong box was about thirty years old and had a narrow face with shifty eyes and a silly mustache. He also had a deeply serious .357 Magnum, a three-piece light pink suit, and exhaled whisky fumes all over the pet cemetery, thereby immediately lowering property values. Particularly with that suit.

Standing up unsteadily in the box, he slurred, "I shuppose you're wondering why I invited you all here t'night?"

"I don't care, I think that's *mean*, if you want my opinion," said Edie to Shifty Eyes, frowning. "Pointing that gun at us."

Shifty Eyes shifted his eyes and pointed the gun at them. "Want you meet some friends mine," he said. He waved the gun around at the small grave markers. "Friends of mine. All my pals. *Good pals*. Pal pals."

"He can't be as mean as he *looks*," Edie whispered. "The way he loves dogs."

"Take that one over there. Was it shay?"

"Big Tiny," said Andy.

"Big Tiny? You mean *Big Tiny*? Big Tiny's dead! Thass terrible. The S.O.B. owed me money."

Edie rolled her eyes at Andy and Charlie. "A d-o-g owes him m-o-n-e-y."

"Nobody tells me anything,"

said Shifty Eyes. "Who's that over there?"

"Lenny the Limp."

"Lenny the Limp? *Lenny the Limp?* Well, thass not so terrible. I owed *him* money."

Eddie rolled her eyes again.

Charlie looked cautious. She said, "These aren't mutts we're talking about here, are they? Buried around—" She waved her hand.

Shifty Eyes leered. "Friends, neighbors, and countrymen of Albert Bunch, Senior, *thass* who they are. Also persons he *weren't* so friendly with, if you get me."

"People?" said Eddie. She gazed around as if she had just been told she had boll weevils. "Buried *here?*"

"He means criminals, Mom," said Charlie.

"Well, THANK GOOD-NESS!" said Eddie. "It used to upset me so, all those nice doggies of poor Mr. Bunch. But, shoot, they're just a bunch of nasty old *gangsters*, that's all!"

"Lishen," interrupted Shifty Eyes. "I shuppose you're wondering who I am? *Take a guess.* Albert Bunch, Junior." He swayed, leering. "GIVE UP?"

Charlie said, "You're Albert Bunch, Junior."

Albert Bunch, Junior, vigorously nodded, sending out waves of whisky fumes. Then he said, "Wrong. Shortly no longer junior. Shortly Number One Bunch.

Shortly the Big Boss. Shortly Head Honcho. Shortly the Big Enchilada. Head of the Family. Chairman of the Board!" His voice choked with emotion. "*Public Enemy Number One!*"

He brightened quickly. "You'll never know what thish means to me, getting thish chance to visit my old pals, shoot you three, and double-cross my father."

Charlie and Andy looked at each other.

"Now that's *really* mean," said Eddie. "I'm surprised at you. A boy who loves dogs."

"I *hate* dogs and I'm not as nice as I look!" snarled Junior. "I'm just as smart and tough as *Pop* and I'm going to prove it. Dig up a few of these funny bow-wows, take you three and bang, bang, bang, then leave this gun behind which has Pop's fingerprints on it, call the cops—and you know where Big Daddy's going? So who cares? *I'm* taking over, right?"

"Well, that *tears* it!" said Charlie. Two bright spots of color flared high on her cheekbones. "First *you* come along," she said, glaring at Andy, "then this riffraff. You're lousing up my life, do you know that?"

"*Me?*" said Andy. "What about *him?*"

"Well, you started it," said Charlie.

"Lishen," began Junior, sens-

ing that the moment was getting away from him.

"Oh, shut up, Junior!" said Charlie. "*You*," she pointed at Andy. "I haven't been able to think straight since you came here in that stupid shirt. You know why? You've got the hots for me, you son of a bitch, and you know it."

"Crazy as a bedbug!" muttered Junior.

"And maybe I'd get around to doing something about the hots you got for me since you're so slow, you big dope, but then this type shows up." She scowled from Andy to Junior and back. "God. *Men!*"

"I shuppose you're wondering—" began Junior.

"Oh, shut up, Junior!" said Edie. "You keep out of this. You're spoiling everything for those two." She flared: "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" She put her hands on her hips and glowered: "Would your mother be proud of you now? *Would she?*" She exploded: "KINDLY GET THE HELL OUT OF MY CEMETERY!"

Charlie and Andy and Albert Bunch, Junior, all stared at her, equally surprised. It was as if a marshmallow had turned into a hand grenade.

"Grab me by the ear and throw me out of the cemetery," dared Junior, bouncing on his toes and waving the gun.

Edie grabbed him by the ear and tried to throw him out of the cemetery.

Junior fired his gun. Twice. Roaringly.

Edie gasped: "*Oh!*"

She slumped to the ground.

Andy and Charlie froze. Goggle-eyed. Mouths agape. Unbelieving and believing in the worst way. Staring at Edie on the ground, exuding a *soupçon* of aroma of strawberry pie baking, and at the gun in Junior's hand, exuding a *soupçon* of aroma of gunpowder.

Then everything exploded.

"You—!" exploded Charlie first.

"*You!*" exploded Andy decisively, giving her a shove out of the line of fire and charging at Junior.

BANG! BANG! BANG! exploded Junior's .357 Magnum.

Andy didn't pause to realize he wasn't dead. Or fatally wounded. Or bleeding profusely. Or even *scratched*. Or none of the above and still charging at Junior.

"It's a *trick!*" cried Junior. "BLANKS! I was set up!" With a whimpering snarl he threw the gun at onrushing Andy. "Doublecrossed by my own pop!"

Andy threw Junior.

Junior did a loop through the air, nosedived into the casket, bounced off the casket, flipped into the grave—

—and the casket tottered, creaked, and tumbled down into the grave on top of him.

Hard. Heavily.

Fatally.

"Ooooooooh," said Edie, coming to from having fainted.

"Uh . . ." said Andy, staring down into the grave.

"Thank God!" cried Charlie, throwing her arms around Andy's neck. She said, "I suppose I'm going to kiss you. *Don't you dare black out on me!*"

Andy started to deny that it was possible he would black out just from her—

She kissed him.

He blacked out on her.

Later there was a telephone call.

"I hear you're getting out of the pet cemetery business.

"For health reasons.

"Heh heh heh.

"Am I right or am I right?"

And Charlie Clifford was cured of her Cute Animal Com-

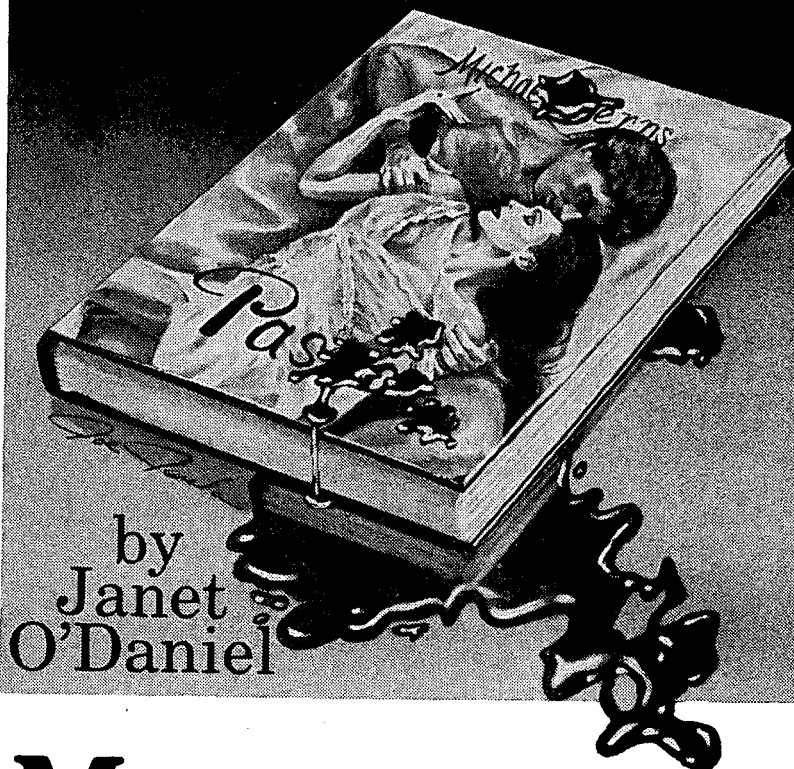
plex and sold to a publisher a children's book that was all about a gorgeous hunk of a chipmunk named Andy and Hollywood loved it and made a feature-length animated movie version, only they of course changed it and starred a casting-against-type, anti-hero ferret as Andy.

And Charlie explained to Andy (her human Andy) that he wasn't really dumb, he simply had a Spelling Complex, and after several sessions of therapy he was able to spell "inferiority complex" and even "marriage license" backwards and forwards.

And Edie Clifford moved to the country and built the Albert Bunch, Junior, Memorial Animal Hospital with the generous and continuing financial assistance of Albert Bunch, Senior, who once a year sends a wreath saying "In Gratitude," to be laid on the grave of "*Fink*," a weasel.

FICTION

A Heart for Murder



My business is romance, not murder. If I'd had even the remotest idea that I was going to get involved in anything like that, I can tell you right now I never would have left Seneca Falls for that romance writers' convention in

New York City. I'd have taken my suitcase right out of the trunk of the Plymouth and marched back into the house. I'm not kidding.

I'd been to these conventions before. Three days of seminars, luncheons, and lectures at a big

Illustration by Joe Jereda

New York hotel. Also what they call a "hospitality hour" where different publishers take rooms, serve wine and cheese, display their latest books, and have authors sign autographs. Would-be writers are taking notes like mad all through it because you don't have to be a published author in order to attend. All you have to do is pay the convention fee. And if any of these beginners had asked me what I thought, I'd have told them they'd be better off back home at the typewriter. Well, nobody asked me. Of course I'm not exactly at the top of any best-seller list. I'm not even on it, in fact, and I never have been. But I make a modest living turning out paperback romances that are usually racked near the door at Woolworth's. Heartbeat House, my publisher, thought it would be a good idea for me to go to the convention and this time they said they'd pay, which is why I went. I was supposed to be on a panel at one of the seminars—"Contemporary Romance Writing: The Joys and Pitfalls." Also my editor wanted me on hand for the hospitality hour to sign copies of my latest book. And when I think of how *that* worked out, I still get the shivers.

But on the second day of the convention I did witness some-

thing very nice, and that was the start of a romance. A real one, I mean. It was at a lecture in one of the meeting rooms, and I was sitting in an aisle seat next to a young man in a rather worn corduroy jacket. He wore a name badge as we all did, with a heart in one corner. His read *Dolores Dawn*, which made me smile, and when he saw the smile he grimaced and said, "My publisher's idea of a joke."

"Pen name?"

"Afraid so."

"I think I've seen some of your titles. I'm Millicent Foster. I write for Heartbeat House."

He reached out to shake hands and smiled a nice open smile. I imagine the fact that I am fifty-five and have graying brown hair and no particular sense of style tends to make young men open with me—rather the way they'd be with a maiden aunt. It isn't a totally unpleasant thing and I'm quite used to it. I started to ask him who his publisher was, but I was interrupted by a small commotion behind us as a young woman made her way down the aisle. She was carrying a clipboard, a notebook, a sweater, a convention program, and as she walked she kept dropping things and people kept picking them up and handing them to her—

pencils, scarf, sweater. When she came to our row she paused, stuck her lower lip out, and blew dark bangs out of her eyes. The eyes were large and very blue.

"Is that seat taken?" she asked, motioning with her head to the one on the other side of the young man.

I started to say no, but he said it before me and jumped to his feet to let her in. I got a rather sharp jab with her clipboard which she apologized for as she struggled past us to get to the empty seat. She sank into it with all her jumbled gear, breathed a large sigh, and then caught sight of his name tag and let out a roar of laughter. "Dolores Dawn?" she said, the laughter trailing off into giggles.

This time he reddened—he had that kind of clear, fair skin that showed color quickly—and snatched the tag off. "No. Henry Weatherby," he said a little stiffly, and she looked contrite.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have laughed. You're an author, then. I can tell by your heart."

"My heart?"

"Yes. On your badge. Red for published writers, pink for aspiring ones. I'm on the registration committee."

"You're a writer too?"

"Editor. Mimosa Press."

I leaned forward, and said across Dolores Dawn, "Millie-ent Foster."

"Hi," she said pleasantly. "Molly Grant." She glanced at my badge. "Another red one. What house?"

"Heartbeat," I said, and at once she seemed to recall something.

"I've seen your titles. *Love's Dark Sunrise*—isn't that your new one?"

I nodded, liking her at once. We exchanged a little more shop talk, but then I sat back and left them to it because I could see that they were hitting it off quite well. Molly struggled to consult a wrinkled program. "Is this lecture 'Turning Romance into Royalty'? They're all starting to run together in my head."

"That's right," Henry said. "Delphine Sable's giving it. She wrote *Passion's Sweet Flame*."

"Oh yes," the girl said. "She's one of ours."

At that moment Delphine Sable appeared on the small raised platform and everyone hushed up. She was a large, handsome, fortyish woman with a cloud of black hair and big dark eyes against white skin. She wore boots and a long swirly skirt, a lot of Indian-looking jewelry, and a woven shawl which she cast over one shoulder. I'd known Delphine for some time.

Not very well—just through chance meetings at gatherings like this. She used to be Dottie Sweeney, and she never wanted to waste much time with someone who drove a Plymouth and wore Wallabees. I always reminded myself that she was on the rack in Woolworth's the same as I was. However, I'd heard talk that this year Delphine had broken out of the paperback field and had written a "big" novel. I leaned forward to ask Molly Grant about it, thinking she'd probably know if she worked for Delphine's publisher.

I never got the question out because what I saw stopped me cold. She was looking toward the platform and her face, which had seemed so young and scatter-y and friendly only moments ago, had gone pale and stony. Her mouth was tucked in coldly at the corners and all the sparkle had left the blue eyes. They had narrowed into a look that seemed to me pure hatred. In the space of an instant it vanished—I thought by an act of will—and she was herself again, but I wasn't. That look had sent a chill all through me. What was it Emily Dickinson wrote, "zero at the bone"? That was how I felt.

I didn't hear much of Delphine's lecture, but then I wasn't too interested anyway. I fig-

ured there wasn't anything she could tell me that I didn't know already, which might sound very arrogant of me, but it was pretty much how I felt about Delphine's talent level. I enjoyed a good deal more the little innocent eavesdropping I was doing on the conversation beside me, which took place quietly on and off during Delphine's talk. I missed some of it, but I caught the general tenor.

"What kind of editor?" Henry Weatherby asked.

"Oh—this stuff—romances, and then I do other things, too—general dogsbody, I guess you'd say. What about you?"

"I've done a little of everything, too—writing, I mean. Romances, and also a lot of articles, and I'm working on a book of my own—you know, a real one."

"Isn't everybody?"

"You too?"

"No, not really. Sometimes thought of it but—no."

There was polite applause after Delphine's talk and then some questions were asked from the floor, after which people began to stand up and drift out, consulting programs as they went and looking to see what was next on the schedule.

"You're right. They are starting to run together," Henry said, helping Molly gather up the handbag she had dropped.

"I'm thinking seriously about lunch. Want to join me?"

"Oh—well, that does sound nice. What's on for this afternoon?"

"Let's see." He consulted his own program. "Here's 'Romance Enters the Video Cassette World.' And here's another one—'How Much Sex Is Enough?' Someone named Gormack Brown's giving that one."

"That's bound to be crowded. The video cassettes would be safer."

I was walking out near them but not exactly with them, as they seemed to be just with each other by now. I saw him give her a look. "Or we could skip both of them and take a bus trip to the Cloisters. I was thinking about doing that."

She looked at him, her dark hair fringing those blue eyes, and started to laugh. I thought it had a nice sound. "The *Cloisters*? Whatever made you think of that?"

"Just thought it'd be fun to play tourist."

"Well—it would. Only I really ought to stick to business."

"We could talk about it over lunch."

"Yes, we could do that."

They both noticed me then, said polite goodbyes and said they'd be looking for me again, and then left, anxious to be off by themselves. I observed to

myself that they seemed to have no trouble finding things to talk about, although neither one of them was standard romance material. In the books I write the men are all six four and they're thirty-four years old. The women have coppery hair and pale tawny skin and they're twenty-four. Or sometimes they're twenty-seven if they've already been through a disappointing love affair and are looking for the Real Thing. Yet in spite of these two lacking the proper qualifications, they seemed to be going at it enthusiastically. I enjoyed seeing it. And I liked the Cloisters idea. It seemed to me indicative of a certain innocence. Rather the sort of thing someone from Boise might do. Or Seneca Falls.

I had a date for lunch myself—with Carol McGrath, one of my oldest friends in the publishing business. We found each other in the crowded hotel dining room and managed to locate a tiny table in one corner.

"What's the news from Seneca Falls?" Carol asked after she'd given me a warm hug.

"Come on now, Carol. Seneca Falls doesn't change."

"And I suppose you can't wait to get home—I know you."

"I don't deny it," I said. "But I guess a certain amount of this is therapeutic for a writer." I

motioned with my head at the crowded room, the noise, the New Yorky look of things.

"I caught your panel discussion group yesterday afternoon," she said. "You acquitted yourself very well, dear."

"I didn't see you!"

"Slipped out to make an appointment."

Carol is one of the big movers and shakers in the publishing world. When I first knew her years back, she was with Heartbeat House and was my first editor. About my own age but a lot worldlier and smarter. I always looked up to her. Then a very handsome guy named Brett Harvey lured her away to a job at Mimosa Press, and they had quite a love affair going, so I heard. Of course you don't always get the inside information in Seneca Falls. But what I put together was that it cooled off later when Delphine Sable began to publish with Mimosa and Brett began to look at Delphine. Maybe it was pretty well played out by that time anyway, but I never did forgive Brett Harvey in my own mind. Anyway, Carol stayed with the firm and soon became head of their enormous paperback romance line. A really striking woman, even as she got older, with that true sense of style that some women never lose and others never had to begin

with—yours truly being a case in point. I always thought Brett and Mimosa Press never would have done as well without her and, as I say, I never did forgive him for dropping her, although Carol didn't seem to bear him any malice.

"Did Brett come to this thing?" I asked.

"Oh sure. He's probably here somewhere," she said, glancing around. "There. Table by the window."

I finally located him. He was still handsome and tweedy-looking, although a little grayer. I saw that he was sitting across from Delphine Sable, who was still in her swooping shawl and clanky jewelry. It looked to me as if Delphine was doing all the talking and not very happily either. I raised my eyebrows and glanced back at Carol. "Trouble?" I asked, half hoping that it was.

She laughed. "Brett has his hands full with that one. She's shopping around."

"For another publisher?"

Carol nodded. "And already found one, I gather. Burnham-MacGregor. Problem is her new novel."

"I read somewhere that she'd done a big one."

"She has. We assumed it would be for us. Hardcover, of course, but I know Brett would have gone all out on it. Adver-

tising and everything. Only she wants to take it elsewhere. Brett's trying to reason with her, but my hunch is it's not working. She's been seeing Simon Glass over at Burnham-MacGregor. He's her latest."

I remembered something. "I met one of your young editors this morning at a seminar. Molly Grant. She seemed a nice girl."

"She is, yes," Carol said, but she offered nothing more, and I had the impression she didn't want me to ask any more either, because suddenly her face had a very closed look. Then it passed and she said with her old warmth, "I hear you'll be signing autographs at the hospitality hour later. We have suites right across the hall from each other, so I'll run in and see you."

"Oh dear. I never think I'm cut out for that sort of thing, but I said I would."

"Don't put yourself down, Millie," she said gently, and tapped my hand with two fingers. "You're very good, and your last one was a dandy."

Carol had that way about her. She could always make you feel a little better about yourself. Maybe it was this quality in her or maybe just our long friendship, but I'll tell you right now, I didn't give a hoot in hell about Brett Harvey's trouble with Delphine and her new

book. Good enough for him was more or less the way I looked at it. The only thing that disturbed me the tiniest bit about our luncheon was that reaction of Carol's to Molly Grant's name. Because I'd decided that I liked Molly—and Henry Weatherby, too. I didn't like the thought that Carol had held something back when I asked her about Molly. And that the something might be unpleasant.

After lunch Carol had to dash off and I strolled out through the main lobby just to look at all the people, new arrivals with suitcases and so on—all the busy coming and going of a big hotel. I stepped over to the door and saw the excursion bus out front, with Henry and Molly among the passengers getting on board. A lot of the others were tourists, you could tell. I was pleased she'd decided to go with him. Then, when I turned away, I caught sight of Delphine Sable again. You couldn't miss her, even in a crowd. This time she was with someone else, and I took it to be Simon Glass, her new love interest. He was tall enough to be one of my heroes, only I'd never have used him—he was too aware of himself and the image he presented to the world. Curly light hair, big tinted glasses. And the way he stood, held his head, looked around the lobby—all very

studied, all begging the world's notice. I did see a lot of heads turning and eyes following the two of them. Only I liked my own young couple, Henry and Molly, much better.

I consulted my program and headed for the lecture about romances entering the video cassette world, but outside the door I hesitated and then joined the crowd down the hall for Gormack Brown and "How Much Sex Is Enough?" Might as well enjoy this thing, I thought.

I was thinking about Delphine as I showered and changed late in the afternoon, getting ready for the hospitality hour and the autographing session. The nightmare thought occurred to me that maybe no one would show up or want my autograph, but I pushed that back out of sight and concentrated on the interesting speculation about where Delphine Sable would put in her appearance. Would she go to the Mimosa suite out of loyalty to her old publisher, or would she show up at Burnham-MacGregor's in deference to future possibilities and the new love affair she'd embarked on with Simon Glass? I got into my three-piece green knit and my Red Cross pumps and hurried down the hall to the ele-

vator. Our rooms were on the eighth floor, the hospitality suites down on the fifth.

Henry Weatherby came dashing out of the elevator when the door opened.

"Oh, Miss Foster—Millicent—" he said, and I saw how distraught he looked. "Have you seen Molly?"

"No. How was the Cloisters trip?"

"Oh, great. But we've been back for an hour, and she was to meet me down on the fifth floor after she'd changed. Only she didn't show up. Do you know which is her room?"

I shook my head. "I really don't know, Henry, and I don't think we ought to go up and down the hall banging on doors. Come on, let's go back down. She'll turn up."

He allowed me to ease him back into the elevator and we went down to the fifth floor, which was looking very festive with doors open all up and down the corridor where the various publishers were holding receptions. There were balloons and flowers everywhere and one publisher had sent out two girls in short skirts carrying trays of paperbacks like the cigarette girls in those 1940's movies. People were drifting in and out of the open doorways and it was very colorful.

"I've got to get down the hall

to the Heartbeat House suite," I said to Henry. "I'll ask around if anyone's seen her. But don't worry, she's probably just a slow dresser." Thinking back to how she had looked this morning with things sliding out of her grasp, dropping and trailing, I thought that might be a pretty fair guess. Not a very organized person, I thought. But that wasn't necessarily a mark against her character. In fact, it could be a rather endearing quality. I was pretty sure Henry Weatherby saw it that way. I patted him on the arm and hurried off down the hall.

The publisher had arranged for two of us Heartbeat House authors to be signing autographs and had arranged two tables for us in their suite. The place was decorated with a lot of flowers, a table of wine and cheese snacks, and, in the center, racks and racks of their romances, which the convention delegates, friends, and hangers-on were allowed to help themselves to. The other author who was making a personal appearance was Valerie Desmond, whose latest was *Love's Forbidden Ground*. I'd met her before, and she wasn't a bad sort, except that she always got herself up like one of her own heroines—long mane of red hair and a Chinese-style

skinny dress slit way up her legs. I thought I looked passable—neat, anyway—in my three-piece knit, but nearly everybody who came in did get Valerie's autograph first before drifting over to me, I noticed. However, once they'd identified me with my books they warmed up—romance readers are a very faithful breed—and I had some nice chats with them and with quite a few would-be writers, who asked me for advice about how to break into the field, how many hours a day I worked, whether I used a word processor, and so on. I began to enjoy it, I must admit, and hardly noticed the time passing until Carol MacGrath came breezing in to say hello, looking very elegant in a blue silk suit. She'd even brought a copy of my new book to be autographed, which was the kind of thing Carol did, making it seem as if it was a big honor to her.

"I have to dash back, dear," she said then. "Have to locate Brett. He's gone tearing off in a terrible stew to try to find Delphine. She hasn't shown up yet."

"Maybe she's gone to Burnham-MacGregor with her new boyfriend," I suggested. "It occurred to me she might do that."

"Oh Lord, I hope not. That would really tear it."

"Is Molly Grant over there in

your suite?" I asked, suddenly remembering Henry and his concern.

"Molly?" Carol stopped and looked at me. "No, I haven't seen her. She's supposed to be, come to think of it."

"I wondered. Someone was looking for her. What's her room number, do you know?"

"I think she said 812—why? Is anything—"

"No, just wondered. Carol—" Her eyebrows lifted slightly as she looked at me. I felt awkward, but there was something I wanted to know. Something that had been burrowing around in my head all day. "Is Molly a good editor? Capable?"

"More than capable. Extraordinarily good, I'd say. A little slapdash in her personal habits, but not in her work. Actually she's a first-rate writer herself."

"I didn't know that. Has she worked as editor on Delphine's books?"

Carol gave me an odd look. "Yes. Why?"

"I just wondered." But I was remembering the look Molly had given Delphine that morning in the lecture room. It still bothered me.

Carol excused herself to hurry back to her own suite—I sympathized with her, trying to find Brett Harvey and calm him down. I glanced back at the

crowded room behind me. Everyone was laughing and talking and I decided no one would miss me if I ducked out for a few minutes. I made my way out of the room and back along the corridor, pushing through all the delegates and balloons to the elevator, and punched the button.

It was right then that I saw two men mixing it up there in the crowded hallway—I could hardly believe it. But at once I realized it was Brett Harvey and Simon Glass. I heard Brett mutter something like, "Now, wait a minute. I've got something to say to you—" and tall, supercilious Simon Glass, looking startled, reply, "Get lost, will you—"

Then, incredibly, Brett—ten years older and six inches shorter—threw a punch at him. It fell short of doing any damage except that it jarred Simon a little and knocked his tinted glasses crooked. His mouth opened in a look of disbelief which was almost comical, and he drew back as if he knew this and had to restore his image fast. "What the hell?" he muttered, and made as if to throw a punch himself. But before he could do it—and I thought much to his relief—some man dashed up and got between them, and then I saw Carol hurrying up, looking pale and furious.

"Brett, for God's sake," she hissed at him and at once dragged him off down the corridor, leaving Simon to adjust his glasses and to shrug with an attractively bewildered look, all of which caused a couple of women to hurry over to him and start murmuring in sympathy and admiration. I heard the elevator door open behind me so I got on and took it to the eighth floor, thinking on the short ride up that from now on I would give serious thought to staying in Seneca Falls no matter what the inducements to do otherwise.

I knocked at the door of Room 812 first but no one answered, and when I put my ear close to listen, I could hear distant sounds of water running. Molly was evidently in the shower. Then I walked on to 817, which was on my side of the corridor, farther along. I knew it was Delphine Sable's room because I'd seen her entering it the day before. I raised my hand to knock but then I stopped, suddenly realizing what I was doing and wondering what I would say when Delphine came to the door, looking right through me in that swooping, arty way of hers. Also I wondered whether Simon Glass had just come down from her room. *That* could be a perfectly obvious answer as to

why she was late showing up downstairs. And if Brett Harvey had figured it out, it might have been the reason for his throwing that punch. I took a tentative step back and something glistening on the floor caught my eye. I bent over and picked it up, but before I had a chance to do more than glance at it I suddenly became aware of a sound. Once again, water running, only it was louder than the sound of Molly's shower, and now I realized why. The door was open a crack, as if it had been hastily or carelessly pulled shut. I put up a hand and very gingerly gave it a push. It swung open. The shower grew louder and I stepped inside.

All the lights were on and the room was full of an expensive-smelling scent that I thought could only have been worn by someone with Delphine's aggressive self-assurance. Clothes were tossed on a chair by the rumpled bed—the things she had worn earlier in the day. I saw the swirly skirt, the shawl, and, on the floor, the soft high-heeled boots. I tiptoed across to the bathroom door, hesitating again, but then knocking smartly. If she came charging out, furious with me, I would just have to think fast and apologize. Only I was beginning to feel a cold quiet certainty that she would not do that. I waited

for a moment and then pushed the bathroom door open. My heart was beating hard and fast. "Her heart pounded furiously," I would have written of one of my heroines. The place was steamy and moist and considerably messed up. The counter by the sink was a jumble of knocked-around cosmetic jars and bottles—I could even see, in that instant's look, where the perfume smell came from. A bottle had been knocked on its side and was drizzling onto the floor. And there in the white light of the tiled bathroom was Delphine, sprawled in the tub with the shower curtain pulled back and the shower on, the water pounding down on her where she lay on her side with her knees drawn up, her long dark hair spreading in wet strands across her shoulder. I could see the ugly wound above her temple, but all the blood had washed away tidily with the brisk and cheery fall of the shower.

Back down on the fifth floor, in the hospitality suite rented by Mimosa Press, things were going on as before. People were milling in and out, and there were all those balloons and flowers, which for me had now taken on a garish mock-festival look. Against one wall was a long ta-

ble covered with books, including Delphine's latest, *Passion's Sweet Flame*, prominently displayed. There was a banner on the wall back of the table: MIMOSA: FIRST IN ROMANCE. I saw Carol talking to a group of people, all of them holding plastic wine glasses and eating little canapes. I hurried over to her and, excusing myself, said quietly into her ear, "Something's happened, Carol. I have to talk to you." She nodded, looking puzzled, and we took a step away from the others. "Something's happened to Delphine," I said, and then as directly as I could, I explained it to her. I saw the color leave her face and before she could stop herself—I could tell—those luminous gray eyes of hers swept around the room. I knew she was looking for Brett. She found him talking to some woman across the room and then at once her look returned to me. "My God," she breathed softly.

I said, "We have to call the police right away. Or somebody does."

I could see her pulling herself together with a visible effort, but in that clear-headed, controlled way that never seemed to desert her. "I'll call the management," she said. "There's a small room down the hall with a phone in it. I don't want to call from here." And then, giv-

ing me a scrutinizing look, "Millie, dear, are you all right?"

I nodded. She started out, and then, turning back to me, she said in a curiously pleading way that I thought wasn't like her at all, "Keep an eye on Brett, will you, Millie?"

I nodded again, not knowing just what good that would do, but knowing Carol well enough to read what was in her head. If Brett had done it—I know that thought must have hit her at once when I told her Delphine was dead—she wanted to protect him the best she could. Keep him from saying or doing anything that would dig him in any deeper.

I have to admit that Brett was the first one I thought of, too. No, the second one, I corrected myself, closing my hand around the thing I'd stuck in my pocket. I looked at him again, trying to read some indication of guilt or innocence in him as he stood there talking. His companion was a tall, serious-looking young woman with glasses and a frizzy hairdo, and I heard her say, "The important thing in any medium, of course, is making a personal statement, and if that happens to coincide with the marketplace demands—" Brett was listening to her as if it really mattered to him. I noticed that one tuft of hair was sticking up

in the back of his head where he must have neglected to smooth it down after the set-to in the hall with Simon Glass.

I was feeling a little weak in the knees myself suddenly, even though I'd assured Carol I was all right, and I was just looking for a place to sit down for a minute when Henry Weatherby appeared in the doorway, still looking harried and lost. He caught sight of me and called out, "Oh, Miss Foster—Millicent—did you see any sign of Molly? She still hasn't come downstairs."

I said, as calmly as I could manage, "I heard her shower running, Henry. She ought to be along soon."

And then, as if on cue, there was Molly, coming up behind him and slipping her arm through his. She had changed into a green silk dress and put her hair up in back, and it was altogether winning the way she turned her head up, seeking his eyes and asking forgiveness for being late.

"I'm sorry, Henry," she said. "I was so tired from all the walking we did up there I just lay down on the bed for a minute and then dropped right off."

"It doesn't matter," he said, his eyes feasting on her. "You look great, so I guess it was worth it. All right now?"

"Just fine." For the first time

she realized I was there. "Oh—Miss Foster—Millicent—" Neither one of them seemed to know what to call me. "How come you're not busily signing autographs over at your own publisher's suite?"

"There's been some trouble," I said, moving closer to them and speaking quietly. I hesitated and then said, "When did you last see Delphine Sable, Molly?"

She looked puzzled at my asking. "Why, this morning at that lecture of hers—where we sat together. What kind of trouble?"

"It appears that Delphine is—dead," I said. I probably shouldn't have told anybody before Carol got back with the police, but I just felt there were some questions of my own I had to ask.

"What?" Henry Weatherby's eyes had gone wide, and his arm went protectively around Molly's shoulder. Then he said, "What do you mean—*appears*?"

"Well—she *is*. I found her."

"You?" Molly's eyes grew wide.

"Yes. And—I found this, too, right outside her door." I dug into my pocket and pulled it out, the plastic convention name tag with the pink heart in the corner and the name *Molly Grant*. I saw her hand move to a spot over her left breast where the badge should have been.

"I didn't even miss it. But I can't imagine how it got there." I thought she was starting to tremble a little. "I certainly didn't kill her, Miss Foster."

"Millicent," I said. "All right, if you didn't, there's nothing to be worried about." I said it with more conviction than I felt, and truthfully, I was beginning to have a sinking feeling in my stomach about the whole thing. "Carol's gone to call the management—the police will be here soon. The thing is, Molly—I'm going to have to give them this. I mean—I just couldn't withhold it."

The large blue eyes welled with sudden tears and she turned her face up to Henry's. "Henry, what should I do? They'll think—"

"No, now they won't at all," he reassured her, and I could tell he thought that the police would love her as much as he did. I couldn't bear to tell him not to count on it. "Millicent's right. All you have to do is tell them the truth."

"Yes, of course," I said. I hesitated for a moment then, and at last I asked, "But did you go to see Delphine?"

She swallowed once or twice and answered in a low voice that didn't seem to have much breath behind it, "I did want to speak to her. I wanted to be sure she'd be coming here to

autograph her new paperback romance. I thought she might not. You know, Delphine loves—loved dramatic gestures. And Simon Glass has been blowing in her ear and murmuring all kinds of come-ons to get her over to Burnham-MacGregor. I don't care about Brett Harvey, but I couldn't bear for her to do that to Carol. Carol's nursed her career along every step of the way—and believe me, it took some nursing. Talk about functional illiterates—"She stopped as if she thought she'd said too much, so I asked, "Did you knock at her door?"

"I was about to, and then I realized there was somebody in there with her. I could hear voices."

"A man?"

"I couldn't be sure. They were low—and kind of muffled." I thought of the rumpled bed and nodded. "I just turned around and went back to my own room. I had no idea I'd lost my name badge," she said nervously. "I don't know how *that* happened."

Remembering all those dropped pencils and notebooks earlier in the day, I figured it was just a way of life with Molly.

"Look," I said, "for now, why don't you sit down and wait until the police get here—they'll want to ask questions." There

was more I'd have liked to ask, but I'd promised Carol to keep an eye on Brett, and I thought I should at least make a show of doing so. He and the tall young woman had drifted apart, and now I saw him looking around—wondering where Carol had got to, no doubt, perhaps wondering if Delphine was ever going to show up. Or maybe, I thought, knowing she wasn't going to. I pushed through the crowd to him.

"Mr. Harvey," I said, sticking my hand out. "You may not remember me—Millicent Foster. I'm an old friend of Carol's."

"Miss Foster! Of course I remember you. And I know your books, too. I don't mind telling you we wish we could lure you away from Heartbeat." His smile was wide and genuine-looking, and I could see why women found him appealing. If he knew anything about Delphine or had anything to do with it himself, he was certainly a cool one. But murderers were often cool, weren't they?

"Thank you," I said, and then I thought, well, Carol hadn't told me *not* to say anything, so why not? "Carol's gone to call the management," I said. And then, when his eyebrows went up with puzzlement, "It's Delphine Sable," I said. "She's been—someone's killed her."

He went white and I saw him

sag, as if his knees had suddenly given way. I grabbed his elbow and quickly steered him to a chair. People looked at us, and I thought I'd really blown it. But I got him into a chair anyway, and one or two anxious women came fluttering over and wanted to know if something was wrong. I said no, elbowing them out of the way and then bending over to try to catch what he was saying. All I could hear was, "That bastard. He was up there with her. He did it."

"Who?" I asked.

"Glass. Who else? I knew they were up in her room, the two of them. Saw him come down in the elevator."

Or maybe went up there yourself, I thought. But what would Simon Glass's motive be? If what we'd heard was correct, things were going swimmingly between those two. Still, you never knew what kind of falling-out might have taken place. There was certainly no question about the motive for that altercation in the corridor between the two men, was there?

Carol was at my elbow suddenly, calmer-looking now, although missing her usual sparkle. A little strained, but in control. "I called the manager. He's sending for the police at once." She looked down at the seated Brett. His face was

still ashy. With the tuft of sticking-up hair it made him look singularly old and derelict. "Millie's told you?" she asked, but of course she could see I had.

He turned his eyes up to her in a kind of mute appeal and reached out for her hand. "Carol," he murmured helplessly. "Carrie—"

The detective's name was Minikin, a name I would never have dreamed of choosing if I'd been writing him into a story. It had such a sweet, Munchkin sound. And while he was in no way aggressive or bullying, still, there was a hard center of tough worldliness about him, as if he'd seen it all. But I will say he was very polite and considerate as he questioned me, and I even noticed that he was a bit fastidious in his dress. French cuffs on his shirtsleeves.

"I understand you're the one who found the body, Miss Foster." We were back in the Heartbeat House suite across the hall where I'd been signing autographs less than an hour earlier. Everyone had been cleared out, including glamorous Valerie Desmond.

"The door hadn't caught, you see," I explained. "It was open a crack and I could hear the shower running. I began to think something might be wrong."

"Because of the door being ajar?"

"Partly. But more because of the shower. It sounded, you know, steady—all on one note. If somebody's really taking a shower it's a different sound."

He nodded, and I went on to explain how I'd entered and found her. "Someone had hit her with something."

"Yes. We have the murder weapon."

I was astonished. "You do? Already?"

He ignored this. "Why did you go to her room?"

"Everyone was wondering where she was. She was supposed to be signing autographs and she hadn't shown up. I was curious myself."

He glanced at a small notebook. Then he said abruptly, "Thank you, Miss Foster. We may want to speak with you again later." He paused and glanced briefly at my name tag. "A writer, are you?" he asked.

"I am, yes."

"Do you ever find it difficult to distinguish between reality and fiction?"

"Certainly not," I snapped, feeling quite annoyed.

"I see. Thank you." He didn't seem to consider me a viable suspect, which was a relief in one way and a bit of a putdown in another, I suppose. I certainly didn't care for that last

remark of his. I got up to go, hesitating for a second as I felt Molly's name tag in my pocket, but then I went out. And that, I told myself, was the dumbest thing I could have done. Because it was bound to come out that she went there—these things always came out—and how would I ever explain it then? Withholding evidence, that's what I was doing. I looked across the hall and saw the two of them, Molly and Henry, sitting right where I'd left them, his arm still around her shoulders. Across the room from them Carol was sitting with Brett. Nobody was doing any talking. I didn't want to go back in there somehow. I was suddenly tired and shaky and longed more than anything for my own bed in my own room, a glass of hot milk, or even the cheerful hum of my faithful word processor with its screen flashing back my heroes and heroines living those lives where everything turned out right on the last page and all misunderstandings were resolved. ("But surely you couldn't have thought I cared for Leslie, Mark. And all along I was so sure you were mad about Alicia. . . .")

I walked down the corridor which had gone suddenly quiet. People gathered in little groups and talked in hushed tones. I saw a uniformed officer walk-

ing along beside Simon Glass, leading him to the room where Detective Minikin was waiting for him. Glass looked gray and drawn, his shoulders hunched, all his bright confidence gone. From grief or guilt? I couldn't tell. And right now I didn't want to talk to anybody. All the questions I'd wanted to ask had turned jumbly and vague. I was no longer interested in probing or trying to figure it out. Leave that up to tough, worldly Detective Minikin. I saw a door with a small sign on it—TELEPHONE LOUNGE—and ducked in. It was a tiny room with a table and a telephone, two small chairs, a lamp. Put there, no doubt, for the convenience of conventions like ours, where not everyone had his own room and telephone, and where there was sometimes a need for privacy. I sank into a chair and took a deep breath.

And suddenly knew who had killed Delphine.

Carol found me there ten minutes later, still sitting in exactly the same position.

"Millie? Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right. I've just been sitting here doing a little thinking."

She came in and sat in the other chair. "About who might have done it?"

I shook my head. "No. About who did it."

She gave me a curious look and then a small smile. "Trust you, Millie."

"I won't say it just occurred to me. It was sort of in the back of my head, but then I came here to get away from everybody and suddenly I was sure. I smelled it."

She nodded soberly. "That awful perfume of hers. It's called *Outr  *. Wouldn't you know?"

"Yes. And in a little room like this with no real ventilation—it sticks. You came in here to make that phone call to the manager, didn't you?"

"Yes. And of course it was all over my skirt. I didn't notice that at first, and when I did, I figured it wouldn't be noticed down there with all the flowers and food and people smoking. I didn't dare go to my room and change—there wasn't time."

"Yes." Just as Molly had, I thought. Just as I had, and maybe even poor old Brett. Carrie, he'd said in that pitious voice, harking back to what must have been a love-name once.

"Because of the way she was treating Brett?"

She stared at me and looked down at her hands. "Partly, I suppose. But it was more than that. It was really on account of Molly Grant, too."

"I thought she might be in it somewhere."

Carol looked up at me, as if my lack of surprise surprised her. "Yes. She's so young and intelligent and full of talent, and I knew Delphine was taking advantage of her." I nodded slowly. "When we first signed Delphine, Molly was her editor, but it turned out she did more than just edit. Delphine needed a lot of help to pull things together. Gradually I began to realize Molly was doing more and more of the work, getting those books written."

"And then Delphine decided she was ready to do a big book that might take her out of the rack in Woolworth's and onto the best-seller list," I said.

"Yes." Carol was sitting very calmly in the chair opposite me. The strong, strident scent of Delphine's *Outré* swirled around us, a tangible presence. "And so she turned to Molly for help."

"I was beginning to figure that out," I said. "But what made Molly do it?"

Carol sighed sadly. "A fat fee. Which she badly needed right at that moment. A guy she thought was Mr. Right had just run out on her—he cleaned out a joint bank account they held, took her car, left her with rent she couldn't afford by herself, also a stack of bills she hadn't known about."

I thought about Henry Weatherby, who I was sure would do none of those things, and was glad Molly had met him.

"Delphine convinced her it should be a secret—the book they were working on together. She wanted to surprise Brett, she said. Then she met Simon Glass, and Molly began to catch on she was getting ready to switch publishers. Well, authors do that all the time—nothing terrible about it, only Molly felt betrayed. She's very loyal."

"When did you find out about it?"

"Only this week. Molly finally told me. And when I heard it, I was suddenly so furious—at what she'd tried to do to Molly. The way she was taking advantage of her. I blame Brett, too, don't think I don't, Millie. He's the one who first took her on at Mimosa. The fault's his, too. But I saw how easy it would be for Molly to fall into that second-rate rut—never getting the credit she deserved, never doing any worthwhile work on her own. All because of that awful no-class, no-talent woman," Carol added, but thoughtfully more than angrily. "And of course I already hated her. Tried not to, but I did. Well—that's all there was to it. It was easy to get up there without any-

one's noticing I was missing. There was so much crowding and mingling."

We were sitting close enough so that I could reach out and put my hand on hers. She looked down at it and put her other hand on top of mine briefly, but then drew back away from my touch as if she didn't want any comfort.

"She let me in—she was in her dressing gown and about to have her shower. She looked annoyed and asked couldn't it wait, and right then, honestly, Millie, I didn't even know any more what I wanted to say to her. Why don't we talk downstairs, she said, and walked away from me into the bathroom. I waited until I heard the water running and then I followed her in. But suddenly I was just so furious I couldn't see straight. She'd taken everything I loved away from me and now she was going to start in on Molly. She was just getting ready to step into the shower—she didn't hear me come in. I grabbed the hair dryer, yanked it out of the socket, and hit her with it. She sort of tumbled over into the tub."

"The hair dryer—" I breathed.

"I had the sense then to wipe it off—the handle, I mean. I

didn't even notice the damned perfume until later."

"Oh, Carol," I said. "I'm so sorry. I really am."

We sat there for a time. I made no move to touch her again, but presently she reached out for my hand, took it, and held it tightly.

"I guess I'd better go see that detective," she said at last, smiling weakly.

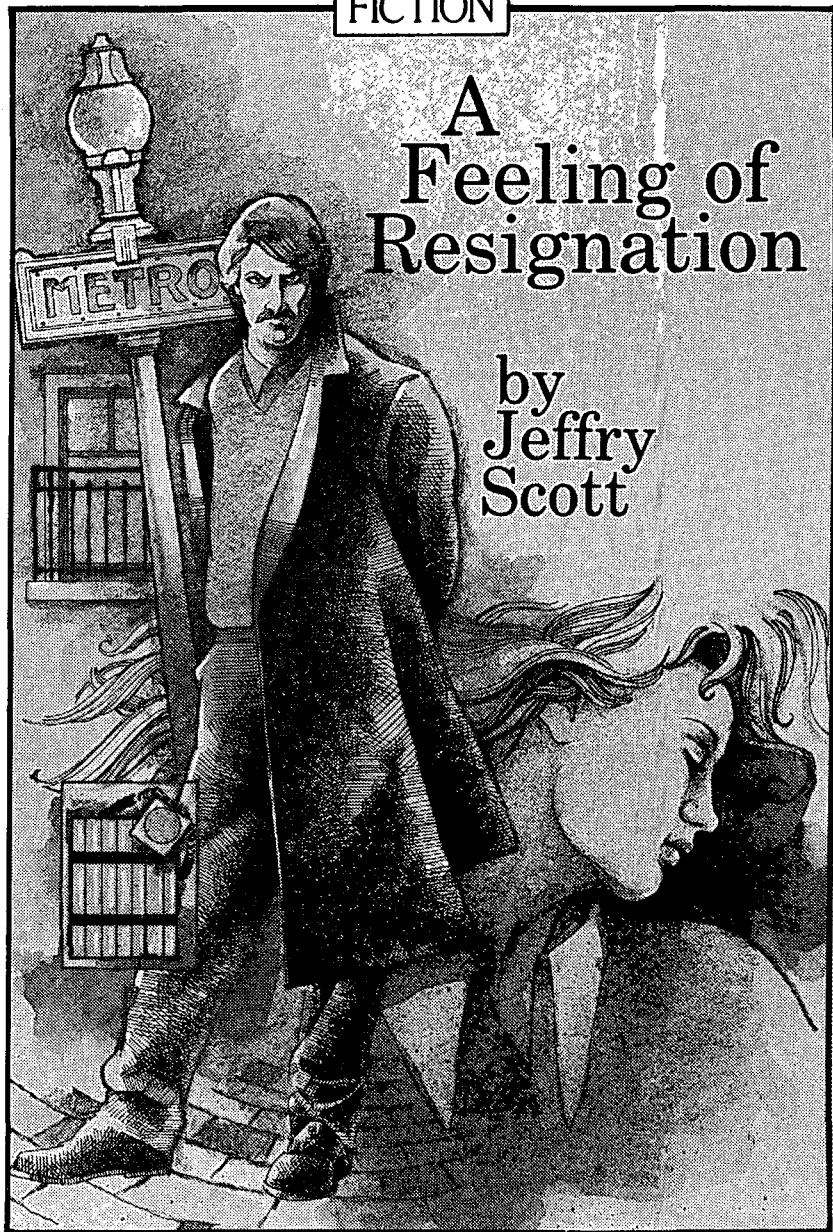
"I'll go with you," I said.

I imagine if you can reach the age of fifty-five without having come face to face with the bitterness of betrayal, violence, and the dark places of the human spirit, you can count yourself more than ordinarily lucky. I've pretty nearly convinced myself that this is so, and indeed I think I have been lucky overall, if only because I have the people in my stories to turn to for comfort—all those Ali-cias, Marks, and Leslies who keep me company in the long hours and never let me down. And a few real live people like Henry and Molly, too. I got a Christmas card from them. But as far as fame and money are concerned, I don't think about them much any more. In fact, I think I'll take that rack in Woolworth's every time.

FICTION

A Feeling of Resignation

by
Jeffry
Scott



Soon as she broke the news—handing him carbon copies of her neatly typed, already posted letters by way of proof—Inspector Jannuk bundled Cissi Tru into his prewar Citroen and drove like hell. The old car had a showroom gleam and ran sweetly. Snide colleagues joked that he'd restored the thing in order to seem more like Maigret. In truth Inspector Jannuk scorned detective fiction, merely enjoying veteran machinery.

Headlong flight showed he was badly rattled. Cissi Tru was female, very much so; this didn't affect his verdict that she was one of his best men. How could she do this to him and the job?

As ever, he slumped down on the seat, chin tucked into chest, eyes half shut, using minimal arm movements. It gave the disquieting impression that he was drowsing or quite possibly dead at the wheel. "You won't change my mind," she began, but then Cissi stopped talking. They were passing a municipal tram, going in the same direction and moving pretty fast, yet it whirled past in a blur. Cissi Tru hunched her shoulders and gritted her teeth, accidentally preventing speech: which was the object of the death-inviting exercise.

Inspector Jannuk took them

to Sandside, that irritatingly pretty village of ice cream parlors, snobby fish restaurants, dunes, and nets hung out to dry picturesquely. Everyone regards Sandside as being remote, right out in the sticks, but it is less than an hour from the capital—providing one breaks speed limits, jumps lights.

They parked on the seafront and went for a walk. Sandside is terrible in winter, deserted and with good reason. Those artless fisherfolk and dumb peasants decamp to villas in Tuscany, the Algarve, and Costa Del Sol, counting their season's takings, memorizing the numbers of their Swiss accounts.

"Why here?" Cissi Tru asked, teeth chattering. Her hair streamed back over her shoulders, putting Jannuk in mind of a ship's figurehead.

"I always come here when I'm upset. And it's no good smooching up to the old feller." Cissi had slipped her arm though his. Veils of sand ripped across the concrete boulevard, whispering bleakly, the shore was as grey as the sea and sky, the infant gale wanted to be a razor blade when it grew up.

"If you're pissed with me or the work, you come and thrash it out with yours truly, man to man," Inspector Jannuk nagged. "Resigning, that's pathetic,

dim." No answer, so he lectured, "We all get fed up and browned off, it's par for the course. Think I've never ached to send in my papers? Modred threatens to resign about once a month, and means it. Sort of a cycle, same as women have."

"I know about women's cycles, thank you."

Jannuk wasn't listening. "So Modred tells me and we go out and close a few bars, stuff ourselves silly with those blessed *frites* off the street stalls, and next day he's got a hangover and I have indigestion and all is well, merry as a marriage bell. That's how it works, not resigning."

"Modred's seriously weird," said Cissi in a small voice. Sometimes she wore contacts and sometimes wire-framed spectacles to signal no-nonsense maturity. This morning it was the specs, lenses magnifying wet eyes; tears put there by the wind, naturally:

"It's too late anyway," she went on, highly interested in the toes of her boots. "Die cast, letter posted, it's with the ministries" (law enforcement in their corner of Europe being a joint fiefdom of the Department of Interior and the Justice Department, Cissi had to inform both sets of bureaucrats about her decision) "and acceptance is automatic. Two

more weeks and I'm gone."

Inspector Jannuk pulled her into one of the beach shelters, in better times a sun trap from which sweaty tourists could contemplate those picturesque nets. Playful youths had smashed every pane of glass but surviving brickwork provided just enough lee for him to set fire to a gnarled cheroot. He jetted smoke through his nostrils, dragon fashion, the plumes not matching because his nose had been broken too often to set properly. "For why, you silly woman? *Why* chuck it in? What, six, nearer seven years' work, good progress, flushed down the lavatory. Makes no sense."

Before she could reply, Jannuk persisted, "You're not burned out. You may not be crazy with courage, but you're not yellow, simply sanely aware of your own mortality, the way it should be. You can't be in trouble because you happen to be straight, same style as me, too dumb to bribe, too proud to steal. There's no earthly reason for you to resign."

Struck by a sudden thought, he prodded her shoulders. "Is that husband of yours making waves?"

"*Joris?*" She sounded at once incredulous and dolefully amused. Inspector Jannuk took the point. Joris Tru owned an electrical store on Fenris

Square, perhaps the finest of the capital's plum thoroughfares, where fools and foreigners flock to pay twice the going rate for half the true value. Joris belonged to the Rotary, spent his leisure hours building model cathedrals out of matchsticks, and, business aside, was a henpecked ninny incapable of making Cissi alter her decision about a certain shade of tights, far less anything important.

"Oh dear," Cissi Tru muttered.

"You haven't told him yet," Jannuk guessed out loud. "Well, I'm flattered. First person you told, eh? Thanks a bunch." Noting her expression, he coaxed, "Okay, it's out of my hands, all cut and dried. At least have the good manners to give me a reason."

She very nearly did, he wanted to shake the wretched girl. But all that emerged was, "It's personal, boss. I . . . I must give up." Cissi attempted a joke. "That's it, you want any more, talk to my lawyer."

Inspector Jannuk's mouth dragged down at the corners and his eyes narrowed. "Bloody foolishness! I'm hurt, my girl, very cut-up and offended." The worst of it, from Cissi Tru's viewpoint, was that the clowning allowed him to be sincere.

"Let's get back, enough time has been wasted," he said

roughly. "Come spring, we could have been back here eating shrimps, fat shrimps in a twist of paper. You'll never do that with me, now. You'll be at home, doing your knitting and playing housewife, getting big hips."

Perversely, Inspector Jannuk drove very slowly all the way back to the city, halting at pedestrian crossings even when the nearest pedestrians showed no enthusiasm for switching sidewalks. Out of a long silence, Cissi Tru spoke almost shrewishly. "Joris can be a pain but he won't give me this hassle, you're worse than him and my dad rolled together. You're losing a single investigator, second rank detective at that, big deal."

Jannuk smiled narrowly, reminded of his mercifully defunct marriage, the odious Berthilde and all she had stood for. Him and a woman out in the car, nagging and bad blood palpable; positively domestic.

Lower lip jutting, Cissi muttered, "Nothing to be done about it, too late now." Addressing herself as much as him. Jannuk's cold smile persisted. Nothing to be done? Cissi Tru had just joined a large club: people who underrated him. She was forgetting that he was sly as well as stubborn. She hadn't forgotten about his crucial friend at court, Tweedledum, because

Cissi Tru was unaware that Tweedledum existed.

Too late now? They'd see about that.

Jannuk's team, the Prosecutor's Squad, had been imposed on the cops rather than launched by them, back in the 1970's. By one of those suspicious misfortunes, the Old Guard found that headquarters space was scarce, banishing Inspector Jannuk and his dauntless crew to a suite of offices—well, spaces on the same floor—in the sub-basement. "Classic treatment for mushrooms," he'd declared at the time, "plant 'em in a dark place, keep the manure coming."

His tube light, switched on as he entered his office, stayed unlit until he strained up, making the swivel chair protest, and thumped the fitment, snarling, "Bastard, remember who's in charge." It flickered in a pallid glow. "Too kind," he acknowledged sourly.

Gangling in, Arno Modred unwittingly echoed Cissi Tru. "You're seriously weird, old chap, talking to inanimate objects that way. Bullying the lamp, long conversations with your silly car. First sign of madness."

Inspector Jannuk gave him a neutral look. Jannuk led the squad and Modred ran it, a

demi-inspector one notch lower in rank and, thanks to a modest private income, happy to stay there. They insulted and needled each other from habit, as long-standing friends ought.

Jannuk said: "Cissi's had a brainstorm and resigned, daft mare. Official letters signed and delivered, the full bit. Irrevocable step, not a cry for help. Next move?"

"That's terrible," Modred whined. He had a gift for stating the obvious, and combed agitated fingers across the top of his head, managing to miss actual hair. No great challenge, since he was bald save for a couple of narrow, greased-down stripes set like the clip of invisible earphones. "You must talk to her."

"Good thinking, never occurred to me." Inspector Jannuk eyed him with pleased curiosity. "How did you get to be such a poltroon, Mod? I've been talking to her for most of the morning, much good it did the pair of us."

"Why's she done it?" Modred demanded. "Cissi must know she is due for promotion. I've told her a dozen times that if a woman ever makes it to our top table, it could be her."

"She refuses to say why." Jannuk started constructing fetters out of paperclips. "None of the usual motives seems to

fit. Her husband likes being married to a cop and she's not pregnant, can't have babies, and refuses to adopt. The job isn't too much for her, Cissi has backbone and brain. A corrupt policeman smells stronger than rotten fish to the likes of us, Mod', we know the aroma of old, and our Cissi is fresh as a mountain breeze, all-same the TV ads for disinfectant, so she's not quitting before she gets fired or worse."

The chain lengthened. Jannuk said neutrally, "We appear to have run out of logical explanations."

Modred took the other chair, the suspect's chair, hard as a law enforcer's heart, and still managed to sprawl on it. "Maybe she just got fed up. It happens." He sighed deeply. It happened to him every month.

Inspector Jannuk took the suggestion seriously. "I doubt that. She's leaving because of something, if you follow, not everything in general. Something has spooked her. Ask her what it's all about and she turns into a mixture of a kid waiting for the dentist and a cat stuck in the dog pound."

He frowned, weighing tones of voice, remembered shades of expression, before continuing with greater confidence. "I'm sure that's it. She said, implied, it was strictly personal, a sub-

jective thing. But, all due respect to Cissi's husband, the personal stuff she cares about most is what happens here, her work, that is Cissi Tru's real life."

Modred nodded slowly. "I go along with that. Damn! It's a bit like family, we're too close to each other, stop noticing. I mean, now you mention it, Cissi's been down in the dumps for . . . how long? A few days, week or so. Not like her. I just thought . . ." He trailed away, shrugged, and admitted, "I never bothered to think, assumed she was sulking, sex life not all it might be, whatever."

"What are you droning on about?" Jannuk inquired, genuinely interested.

"You say it must be professional, a case maybe. If I could remember *when* she got the blues, it'd give us a shrewd idea of where to look." Modred blinked and shook his head rapidly. "Hey, now hang on . . ."

"Get Cissi's reports and worksheets for the last month," Inspector Jannuk ordered. When the other man didn't move: "Today for choice, chum—time is not on our side, Tweedledum or no."

The squad's youngest and newest member came into the office. His name was Rolfe, Dickie Rolfe, he was strong as a Sherman tank and had just

about as much tact, finesse, sensitivity. They'd been trying to teach him about knocking and waiting, without startling success.

Slowly and clearly, Inspector Jannuk decreed, "Close the door again, Rolfe. With you on the outside."

Rolfe's brow, all two fingers of it, corrugated deeply. "For how long, sir?"

"Count on getting through several chapters of *War and Peace*. Scat!" Patently anxious to ask what *War and Peace* might be—card game, sexual perversion, police slang?—Rolfe took himself off.

Jannuk turned back to his confederate. "What's the problem? We're detectives, it says here. Let's detect."

"Some folk, such as every man on the squad, would call it spying. And people doing it, they have an even nastier label for them. I mean us," said Modred, determined to make himself clear. "Cissi wants to pack it in and get on with the rest of her life. For personal reasons, you said it yourself not a minute ago." He checked his watch. "Under five minutes, call it three and a half." Jannuk wanted to throttle him. "I'm not sure we have the right to go peeking and prying behind her back, getting clever and sneaky on a fellow cop," said Modred.

"Let me ask you a question, Mod'. Cissi Tru lives for the job, no doubt of that. Square peg in a square slot and so forth. If I was a boring old father I'd say she has a vocation. So answer me this. Knowing her as we do, can you honestly say Cissi wants to throw it all away?"

"She must, or she wouldn't have..." Modred hugged his knees and changed course in mid-sentence. "Ah, I see what you mean. Silver-tongued sod." He unfolded and said resignedly, "Reports and work-sheets, I'm on my way."

Hours later they put the paperwork back to sleep. During the past month Cissi Tru and her partner had been testifying in an interminable fraud trial or catching up on desk work. That, and helping with long, fruitless surveillance at a supermarket out in the southern suburbs. These tasks were neither significant nor sinister, not the stuff of resignation...

"Pretty face, shame about the legs," Modred groaned. His way of saying that the idea had been valid, it simply hadn't worked. He slapped Inspector Jannuk's shoulder. "Come on, who knows why women do anything? My wife's a mystery to me and she is thick as two short planks, bless her. Nowhere near as deep and high-strung as our Cissi.

Face it, boss, Cissi could have resigned because she wanted to, no more and no less."

"Maybe," Jannuk grunted. *His way of saying that he didn't believe a word of it and Modred was a dolt to boot.*

"You won't be told; talk about a bee in your bonnet. Well, I've got a home to go to."

"**G**oofing off can get people killed," stated Second Rank Detective Fred Prieur. "I come on very strong when goofing occurs or only threatens to occur. But Cissi had no call to chuck the job up, just because I scolded her."

Fred was Cissi Tru's partner. A countryman from Mordling, the boring flatlands where they make cheese and babies, little else. He lived around the corner from Demi-Inspector Modred, who was paying a visit on his way home.

For Modred reasoned that if there was anything in Inspector Jannuk's hunch about Cissi's departure being connected with her work, then Fred Prieur could confirm it. As he was doing . . . Jannuk would have got Fred rolling drunk (they roll cheeses along Mordling lanes, a traditional pastime betraying hunger for entertainment of any kind) and then

pumped him cunningly. Modred couldn't be bothered. He swore Fred Prieur to secrecy, explained the position, and asked for Fred's input. "Cissi has officially resigned and we can't alter that," Modred lied. "You can't harm her by speaking out, and you might save the same thing happening to somebody else, down the road."

Fred nodded unhappily. "It was that supermarket stake-out, a few days back, sir. Cissi and me, out on the parking lot, one in the car and t'other wandering around, turn and turn about. Easy but difficult, plenty of willpower and concentration required, when you're stuck with it for hours on end, day after day.

"Okay, I'm in the motor, and suddenly Cissi Tru is *leaving* the parking lot. Going up the street, sort of skulking behind the cars, like she was tailing somebody." Fred Prieur gave an embarrassed cough. "First off, I took it she was obeying a call of nature. No restrooms in the supermarket, but there's a filling station maybe half a kilometer along the street, we'd use the facilities there.

"But no, Cissi played truant for more than an hour. Fine thing, me with three entrances to keep tabs on. The job wasn't dangerous, no need to watch my back, but all the same . . . it

was the principle of the thing!"

Modred nodded understandingly.

Fred said: "Cissi Tru's the best partner I have ever had. Smart, knows the law backwards, good with people, brave but not silly-brave. And dead reliable . . . until then. It shook me up good and proper.

"My first partner was old Speed. Talk about your goofing off, Speed invented it. Drink problem, liver the size of a millstone before he dropped dead. Forever sneaking away to cadge drinks round the back of bars. Fine, you knew where you stood—also, ol' Speed was lucky, always popped up when needed.

"This thing with Cissi was a different kettle o' fish. You can be reliable or unreliable, not both at once, 'tisin't fair on your partner. When she *did* come back, I laid into her hot and strong, explained about goofing off and how it can—"

Mordling folk talk too much, famous for it. Modred cut in brutally, "Why did she sneak off?"

Fred Prieur was surprised, then sheepish. "You never asked why," Modred sighed.

"Not really, sir. I was so angry. Mind you, Cissi said something about it being important but personal, a personal matter. Do you think I, like, bullied her into resigning?"

"I doubt it. But something's going on," said Modred.

Inspector Jannuk's apartment was in a tacky new tower block near the docks.

He didn't like the outer entrance, an L-shaped, generally deserted space full of shadows—automatic lights were supposed to come on at twilight yet seldom obliged—and begging for an ambush.

Therefore, when the man stepped out of the slot where the mailboxes lurked, he walked right into Jannuk's FN automatic, the NATO-issue handgun, slide pulled, live round chambered, its muzzle scant inches from an appalled face. The man gave a small, shrill whinny of alarm and dropped into a crouch, arms crossed over his head.

"Don't be daft, I won't shoot you," Inspector Jannuk growled, testy with relief as he recognized the non-ambusher. Jannuk operated the safety catch and holstered the weapon. "Serve you right for lurking," he added, severely.

"I was *waiting*, I have been for hours." Joris Tru, Cissi's husband, straightened up, trembling. "Lurking? I'm a taxpayer!"

"Does you credit." Jannuk was nonplussed.

"I'd like a word with you in

private, inspector." Joris Tru, recovering from his shock, strove to sound authoritative. "You owe me a hearing, you owe both of us, my wife and I. Cissi is too much the lady, she seems ready to accept being hounded out of the police. I shall fight it, though."

"You'd better come on up." Jannuk led the way. Hounded out? Over his shoulder as they climbed the stairs, he asked, "Is Cissi claiming she has been sacked?"

"She is in emotional trauma," Joris Tru puffed, a plump fellow unused to so many steps. "Refuses to discuss the affair. But it's obvious. I mean, Cissi would hardly resign, eh?"

"Ah," Jannuk replied neutrally, unlocked his door and waved the indignant husband inside.

Joris Tru stopped short as the lights blazed on. "It's empty," he said dazedly, "no furniture. No TV, no stereo. Nothing."

Trust an electrical goods man to notice that he'd made no sales here, Jannuk told himself. And aloud, defensively, "I like it spacious, uncluttered." What it was, the odious Berthilde had made a clean sweep when she left him. Still defensive, Jannuk muttered, "There's a bed in the bedroom, counter and stools in the kitchen. You can sit on that roll of carpet by

the window. Hang on, I'll make us some coffee."

Joris Tru had perched on the carpet when Inspector Jannuk returned bearing two mugs. "I only drink decaf," Mr. Tru warned.

"This tastes nasty enough to pass for it," Jannuk assured him. "What's on your mind, Joris?"

Cissi's husband sipped gingerly, pulled a face, and set the mug aside on the parquet. "I love my wife, inspector. I'm not accustomed to begging, not an assertive person but I never plead. However, if Cissi feels unable to stand up for herself, negotiate, bargain, beg for fair play and a second chance . . ."

He gave the policeman a rueful look. "No good at this, I'm babbling. May I start over?"

"I've got all night."

Joris Tru pressed his fingertips together, lips moving silently. Finally he said, "It always preyed on Cissi's mind, that form she had to complete before they accepted her for police training academy. I told her the wording was precise, 'blood relatives or relatives by marriage,' and Brian wasn't a relative of any variety. Thus, she wasn't misleading the police."

Jannuk managed to sound off-handed. "You are right. For some reason the powers-that-be

get spooky if a cop is related to a crook. But old boyfriends, school pals, they don't count."

Tru was grateful. "There, just what *I* said. I give you my word, Brian has no influence over my wife, not the slightest."

Inspector Jannuk smiled benignly. "Tell you what, supposing you go through the whole thing, start to finish, as if I knew nothing of the background. No, bear with me, it may strike you as daft but there is a reason."

Mr. Tru crossed his legs and folded his arms. "I've heard about this, you think you can catch me out in a lie if I have to repeat everything. No chance, my dear sir! Because this is the pure, simple, and unadorned truth, I can reel it out a hundred times . . ."

"**D**on't you find it rather sickening to be right all the time?" Modred greeted Inspector Jannuk the next day. "Cissi Tru—it does have something to do with her work. Just before quitting, she goofed off for the first time in recorded history."

"That must have been when Brian came back on the scene." Chortling inwardly, Jannuk was elaborately placid.

Modred sat down, staring at him somberly. "I shall murder

you one of these days. *Brian?*"

"Cissi Tru's foster-brother, after a fashion. Those parents of hers, the country doctors with the socking great house . . . They take kids in, long-term, bring 'em up like family. Started in the war and Cissi's mum and dad are card-carrying do-gooders, never lost the taste for helping children."

Inspector Jannuk, cheroot drawing nicely, blew a smoke ring and sent another spinning through it. Even the smoke looked smug, omniscient. He could be hard to take, so soon after breakfast. "Brian, that's Brian Nussan, wasn't a great success. A likable loser and jerk who grew up with Cissi's folks. She's fond of him, or was—played the big sister, looked out for him."

"Young Nussan got the collecting bug early, never lost it. Money, valuables, anything portable providing it didn't belong to him. Not a novel life story, it's what keeps us in business."

"Cissi told you all this?"

"Don't be daft, Mod', hubby spilt the beans. Joris Tru dropped in last night. I nearly blew him away, the chump. He'd got it into his head *we* were firing *her*, and tried to change my mind, assuming I knew the background, Brian and so forth. Which I did, when

he stopped droning away.

"Brian Nussan is a petty criminal. Only a problem for us and the people he ripped off, at first. Cissi and her parents didn't approve, goes without saying, but they kept up pious hopes that he was just going through a phase. But then Cissi decided to join the police and ran up against the famous non-criminal-kin requirement.

"Very sensibly, her parents persuaded her that she wasn't her non-brother's keeper." Inspector Jannuk's craggy face darkened. "Less sensibly, they persuaded her to say nothing at all about Nussan. If she had—"

Modred butted in, "She might well have been rejected. We're talking about nearly a decade back, remember. We weren't quite as desperate for staff, recruiting policy was pickier. Who knows? All right, Cissi nailed the skeleton in her closet and . . . ?"

"Brian Nussan got out of prison, his latest six-month vacation, the week Cissi Tru was accepted as probationary patrolwoman. She went to see him, appealed to Brian's better nature." Jannuk sniffed eloquently and rolled his eyes. "She told him what lay in the future: she might have to arrest him, or somebody else would and their connection would emerge, disgracing her.

"Against the odds, her foster brother does have a better nature, though it doesn't stick. He's even honest in a warped manner—admitted he might not be able to go straight but he was willing to do the next best thing, get out of the country for good and all, emigrate."

Modred raised his eyebrows. "Emigrate, with a record? Who was he kidding?"

Jannuk gestured impatiently. "Nussan found work overseas, it's the same difference, you pedantic beggar. If a man has the trade skills—Brian Nussan is an ace welder—and he is willing to roast to death in the desert, live like a camel with never a beer, the authorities tend to pass over piffling little convictions. Nussan did leave the country."

"But he came back. Of course! Cissi Tru must have spotted him at that supermarket stake-out t'other day," Modred said. "That was why she got Fred Prieur in a tizzy, dashing off into the blue at zero notice. She was chasing Nussan."

"Exactly. She lost him, couldn't get in touch, and had her little brainstorm. Responded to what she saw as inevitable disaster when Brian got into trouble here, by resigning in a hurry."

"Poor kid," Modred breathed. He frowned and coughed. "Poor,

soft-in-the-head kid! He could murder a provincial senator or urinate on the King's Memorial outside the palace, and it wouldn't make a scrap of difference to Cissi Tru's career."

Head on one side, he examined the statement. "Well, a scrap of difference, maybe. Nothing official, though. He's not a member of her family, there is no real link."

"Exactly," Jannuk repeated, and blew another smoke ring. "Now we lean on Tweedledum to abort this resignation nonsense, talk some sense into Second Rank Detective Tru, find Brian Nussan and kick his larcenous backside, I mean hard, send him on his travels once more." He rubbed his hands. "All done and dusted, what could be nicer than that?"

But it wasn't over, it had hardly begun.

Afterwards, Inspector Jannuk argued that Providence had been at work. Not coincidence, that was a blasphemous interpretation of events. No, Providence joined the squad.

It must be stressed that Inspector Jannuk and Demi-Inspector Modred had plenty to occupy them aside from Cissi Tru. Documents to be read, orders given, assignments assigned. Life went on, likewise the caseload. They liked Cissi

and wouldn't lose a good second rank detective with prospects if they could help it, but . . .

Jannuk had told Cissi to take a day or two off before coming in to clear her desk. He planned to go and talk to her that evening, there was no rush. Meanwhile, Modred ordered unpolished yet effective Dickie Rolfe to pull Brian Nussan's package from Central Records (upstairs, east wing) and seek a fix on Nussan's present hang-out in the city. Modred didn't dismiss the matter exactly, he set it aside as a good delegater should.

Hearing the end of that briefing, Inspector Jannuk told Rolfe, "There'll be a full-face and profile of Nussan in the Records package—photocopy it for me." He always liked to see what people looked like.

Rolfe barged in perhaps an hour later—no knock—and dropped the double portrait on Jannuk's blotter. "Get out, mannerless sod," his master remarked, gratefully. Rolfe obeyed, grumbling silently.

Inspector Jannuk cocked an eye at Brian Nussan's face. Nussan might have been a brain surgeon, an axe killer, a cop. The criminal face is a fallacy, and in any case, Nussan wasn't much of a criminal, more of a minor pain in society's neck. Jannuk grunted abstractedly,

pushed the photocopy to one side, and got on with the next thing.

Out in the squad room, towards evening, Dickie Rolfe lumbered over to Modred and said, "Some joke! I know new chums get sent on wild-goose chases, but I been here nigh on six months now, skipper. Bit late in the day to be pulling my leg."

"Address me by rank," Modred retorted stuffily, "else I'll make you skip with a vengeance, sonny!" Then, belatedly, "What wild-goose chase?"

"Brian Nussan," said Rolfe. "Run him down, says you. Fine by me, says I. Quite fancy a trip to foreign parts. Nussan is in Saudi Arabia . . . demi-inspector, sir."

"Wrong tense," Modred jeered. "He was there but he snuck back recently. Don't you ever listen, thickhead?"

Dickie Rolfe scowled and lowered his thick head, charging bull mode. "Begging your pardon, Mr. Demi-Inspector sir, your worshipfulness, but I just been with Nussan's last probation officer and he *knows* Nussan is tucked away safe and sound in Saudi. For why? On account of the probation feller spoke to him there, this very morning. Rings him once a week, why not, the government pays."

"You're putting me on!"

Rolfe stopped sulking. "You really thought Brian Nussan was back in the city? Nah, this probation officer got matey with Nussan, they're both maniac football fans, support our lot, Capital Crusaders. Mr. Olfson, the probation feller, gets on the horn to his buddy after every match, tells him whether they won or lost, match report, the lot."

Modred mumbled, "That's very rum, very rum indeed," and went off to share the rumness with Inspector Jannuk. When he entered Jannuk's office, the inspector was talking to a grey-foxy man, dressed like a diplomat, English suit, carnation in his lapel, a dandy. The diplomat was Brigadier Pall, chief of the national police counter-terrorism bureau.

Jannuk grinned at Modred. "You must be able to smell trouble, I was opening my mouth to shout for you. The brigadier comes with glad tidings, not for the first time—another bloody state visit in the works."

Pall was a decent stick, he smiled deprecatingly and was about to say something frivolous in return when his glance fell on Jannuk's blotter, specifically upon the front and side views of Brian Nussan. A most peculiar expression appeared on his own face. Voice thin, Pall demanded, "What are you doing with a mugshot of him?"

Jannuk gaped up at him but before he could reply, the brigadier relaxed and looked sheepish. "Sorry for biting your head off. You're such a messy devil, with those cheroots." He whipped out a pristine handkerchief and dusted the portraits. "Bit of ash gave this merchant a moustache . . . and gave me a nasty turn. Who is he, by the way?"

Inspector Jannuk, not best pleased at being grilled, spoke coldly. "A petty crook, one Brian Nussan. Who did you think he was, pray?"

"Kilo." Brigadier Pall produced the name like a curse. "I don't know what his real handle might be, that's what the monster is tagged in the dossiers. He's an assassin, terrorist, you name it. Bad news. The very idea of Kilo being in this country, and with a state visit in the offing . . . ugh!"

Pall squinted at Nussan's image. "Heigh-ho, it's true that everybody has a double. Give your nothing a mustache, make him a shade older, and I doubt whether Kilo himself could tell them apart." Dismissing the false alarm, the brigadier went on, "Gentlemen, I shall need six of your finest next week: VIP's are on their way and it stands for Very Insecure People, these are leaders with enemies. We intend to have plenty of roving eyes on duty, sharp eyes with

brains behind them. So please, seriously now, don't palm me off with your walking wounded and expendable duffers, I'm asking for the cream. Starting with Demi-Inspector Modred, naturally." He could flatter and truckle with the best.

Inspector Jannuk and Brigadier Pall were startled when the cream of demi-inspectors slapped his forehead so violently that it made them jump, exclaiming, "Mary-Mother-o'-God!"

He jabbed a finger at Brian Nussan's mug shot. "That isn't Nussan, boss! I mean, it *is*, but he isn't here . . ."

Gently sarcastic, Jannuk advised, "Slow down, Mod'. Gibberish is only our second language."

Modred got a grip of himself. "Sorry. Listen, Brian Nussan is in the Middle East. Oh, it needs checking, but I'm sure it will turn out to be genuine." He almost danced with frustration at Jannuk's slowness. "Cissi thought she saw Nussan in the street last week, but she made a mistake. *She saw his double.*"

Brigadier Pall had sent a car for Cissi Tru. She'd never traversed the capital in the evening rush hour at such brutal speed. Getting collected by the cloak and dagger boys was upsetting anyway, from habit, they

pounced virtually wordlessly, closer to kidnap than even a brusque arrest.

Flustered, baffled, she looked from Jannuk to Modred and then at Brigadier Pall, whom she knew by sight. Concentrating on Inspector Jannuk she said hotly, "Joris had no right to gossip to you about my family affairs!"

"Drop it, sweetheart," Jannuk instructed, kindly enough to make Cissi's skin go cold. He was a different person. "None of that matters any more. This isn't about you, put the ego on hold. Listen hard, answer precisely. Brigadier . . ."

"Some days ago you saw a man you thought to be your foster brother, the man Nussan. What day was that, and what took place?" Pall asked.

"It was last Wednesday, if you must know. Thought to be . . .?" she faltered.

"Wednesday, splendid. Time?"

"Afternoon." She swallowed, hands fluttering. "Um, it would have been two o'clockish, I'd just swapped with Fred, the clock on the dash showed just past two when I got out of the car. Then I . . . walked to where the shopping carts are, by the main entrance, got a cart, and started pushing it around the lot as if I planned to fetch something from the trunk. Later I'd put some cartons in the cart and

seem to be taking purchases to my vehicle . . ."

Aware of tension, fierce concentration from her listeners, Cissi shivered. "It would have been, say, two fifteen when I happened to glance across the lot to Hansel-street. I saw Brian walking past, heading for the crossroads by the filling station. It *was* him, of course it was. He's grown a mustache and it doesn't suit him, but I know my own broth— Well, I think of him as that."

Brigadier Pall smiled falsely, smoothing his silvery hair. "Carry on, dear. You saw . . . Brian Nussan, for the sake of argument. What then?"

Hugging herself, Cissi addressed Inspector Jannuk. "It knocked the stuffing out of me, sir." She was wearing a moss-green suit, quite the eminent store owner's spouse, mature and matronly, and looked like a schoolgirl in her mother's clothes. "I was stunned. Brian was supposed to be thousands of miles away, he'd written to me airmail, only a week or so ago. Now he'd broken our agreement, and worse, he was going about his business and never had the decency or guts to warn me. By the time I came round—it was almost the same as concussion, that shock—the street was empty, he'd turned the corner.

"I chased after him, calling. He must have heard me screaming, 'Brian, Brian' and taken to his heels." Cissi Tru took a deep breath.

"When I reached the corner of Hansel-street and looked around, he'd vanished. Hansel-street joins a main road there, the big filling station is round the corner, then it's just grass verges, trees, Brian would have been easy to spot.

"Obviously a bus had turned up, there's a stop at that corner, and he jumped on it. I went to the filling station, asked if they'd noticed a man get on the bus. Nothing."

"Never mind that," Inspector Jannuk grated, swift to stop her from crying. "You're still a cop for a day or two, think straight. We've got this twin, the dop-pelganger—oh yes, my girl, it was not Brian Nussan—walking past you on Hansel-street in a, what is it, westerly direction. Yeah, west. Think back: what was he wearing?"

Brigadier Pall, hardly taking his eyes from Cissi Tru, was leafing through a street guide.

She was silent for a while. "I . . . can't remember."

Jannuk winked at her, leaning back in his chair. "It'll come. Was he smart or scruffy, would you say?"

Cissi snapped her fingers. "Yes! Brian's a dresser and even

with all the rest of it going on, feeling faint, feeling *furios*, sick . . . I thought he looked awful, unkempt, he didn't even look respectable any more.

"Workboots, black or brown, they seemed so clumsy. Floppy pants, far too big, baseball cap turned back to front. And a raincoat, a dirty looking raincoat."

"Nice," said Jannuk. "Carrying anything, was he?"

Cissi shook her head. "No. Just walking along, like he belonged there, that's what made me so mad."

Inspector Jannuk pondered, rolling a cheroot between his fingers until it crumbled. "He's on foot. But that's car country, commuterland. They get the Merc or the wife's Renault or the maid's Volks out just to cross the street. And they don't favor floppy pants and workboots for a stroll."

"Like he belonged there," Modred echoed Cissi. "Work clothes. He has a job round about that district. Repairmen have wheels, even a laborer has a bike or a putt-putt autocycle if he needs to travel more than a few blocks."

"But," Jannuk pointed out, "it's only houses and the super-market, then the main road, like Cissi says. He doesn't work at the supermarket, she would have seen him before, or again

afterwards. Anyway, dirty raincoats and floppy pants don't go with that supermarket, don't they have pretty uniforms? So where in tarnation was he going? He doesn't live there, surely. No, he left his work for some reason, errand within walking distance, and was on his way back when Cissi saw him. Or vice versa, he was leaving his workplace and she spotted him bound on the errand."

Cissi was tiring of the seminar. "He must have caught the bus. I asked at the filling station, they'd noticed no passersby, but they confirmed that there's a bus every fifteen minutes."

Inspector Jannuk looked at Demi-Inspector Modred and the pair of them grinned, rather like men who have been struggling with a stubborn handle, only to realize that it turns the other way. "Filling station," said Jannuk. "I know the place, they do repairs out back. And this fellow is wearing floppy pants, another way of describing coveralls. With a raincoat on top, a dirty raincoat, grease monkeys can't keep their stuff clean. No wonder they didn't notice passersby, Detective Tru, if that's what you are, which I'm starting to doubt." He guffawed in a most offensive, sexist way.

"He didn't get on the bus, he knew the outcome, but keep

didn't vanish," Modred told her. "You asked the wrong question at the filling station, that's all. Should have asked if one of their staff had just come back."

Cissi's mouth opened and shut as she confronted the suggestion, replayed the incident in her mind. "Oh," she said.

Brigadier Pall had stopped looking at her, he was fascinated by his street map. Now he said, almost dreamily, "There is only one filling station in the Hansel-street neighborhood. Good trading site, plenty of traffic, since it's smack on the airport road. The road my VIP's must travel next week." Closing the book with a snap, he flung it into Jannuk's lap and for the first time in anyone's experience, *ran* out through the office, elegant topcoat swirling like Dracula's cape.

"**T**hey didn't get Kilo, come on, this isn't TV," Inspector Jannuk growled. It was past midnight, they were still in his office, Joris Tru phoning every hour, on the hour, asking when he might have his wife back, please. Cissi Tru was free to leave, naturally; she'd refused to go.

Jannuk had just taken a call from Brigadier Pall. Now he warned Cissi, "You deserve to

your face shut about it. Whole thing never happened.

"Right, Mr. Pall and his merry men checked out the filling station. Kilo, your Brian look-alike, was a mechanic there, day-to-day hiring, money in the hand, don't tell the taxman. Quit at the weekend. Brigadier Pall expects him back for the state visit, though Kilo will have a different name and maybe a new face by then. Maybe not, he'll think nobody noticed him this time around. He was Otto from Brussels, for the filling station job."

Modred nodded gloomily. "I'm only surprised they knew that much about him, or thought they did. Good mechanics are like gold, get a volunteer and you don't pester him with questions, eh?"

Inspector Jannuk agreed, "Otto was a real jewel. Worked all the hours God made, never argued, took all the crappy tasks. So the manager had pity on Otto when the poor guy asked to doss down in the mechanics' washroom, just for the one night when he couldn't find lodgings." He paused. "Outside the restroom's back door is an inspection hatch leading to the station's underground gas tanks. They sell no end of gas, there's a lot of it beneath the trapdoor."

They stared at him. "Yep, bomb hidden away, painted to

match the pipework. Ready for detonation from up to a kilometer off, by radio. Kilo's diversion to draw security forces away while he hit the VIP motorcade from the airport."

Modred unwound from the straight chair. "The diversion would kill more innocent bystanders than the actual attack. Lovely guy, this Kilo. Can they tackle that bomb safely?"

"Can and have," Jannuk confirmed. "That's why Pall phoned me. I dare say he *wants* Kilo to make his move, now. They'll bring the VIP's in to the capital by chopper, clear the filling station section of road, and hope to nail their terrorist. Might work." He yawned mightily, joints cracking with a stretch. "None of our business any more. Simple coppers, us lot. Mind, we earned a lifetime's pay in one day."

"I'm not a copper any more," Cissi Tru whispered.

"Ah," said Modred, "speaking of which..." He extracted a pair of envelopes from the inner pocket of his jacket. "These have bounced back from Interior and Justice. Tweedled—um, the senior civil servant in charge of processing police resignations informs me that your applications are invalid: incorrectly phrased, ambiguous, and one of 'em isn't even signed."

"Sloppy," Jannuk com-

mented. "Means you must submit your resignation all over again, if you still want to leave. Otherwise you're stuck with the job, old dear. Far as the bureaucrats are concerned, you never left."

Cissi was speechless though her face was eloquent. Embarrassed by such blazing joy and relief, Modred caught the other man's eye. "Something to be said for decadence, kinkiness, bondage, and all that stuff," he remarked cryptically.

"Right on," Inspector Jannuk agreed. They were thinking of Tweedledum, rigid official and frail mortal in the same rotund body. Tweedledum had a penchant for getting caught in police raids on exotic recreational haunts. Clients aren't prose-

cuted, just sent packing with a flea in their ear; but the gutter press tend to tease them, naming names. Never Tweedledum's, though. Jannuk and Modred had known that he would come in useful, sooner or later.

Cissi was wiping her eyes and stooping to retrieve the crucial letters. She froze, and said wonderingly, "But . . . they've never been opened, the flaps are still sealed down."

Jannuk countered without hesitation, one of his better adlibs. "Thought you'd never notice. This chap is your original farsighted functionary. Doesn't need to open letters. Surely you know how it goes: our trains can't run on time, weather could be better, but our civil service is wonderful."

SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Gerald: Edgar; auto theft; \$600

Harold: Bob; kidnapping; \$700

Ivan: Denny; counterfeiting; \$900

Jack: Frank; smuggling; \$800

Karl: Curt; bank robbery; \$1000

MYSTERY CLASSIC



Train for Flushing

by Malcolm Jameson

“**T**hey ought never to have hired that man. Even the most stupid of personnel managers should have seen at a glance that he was mad. Perhaps it is too much to expect such efficiency these days—in *my* time a thing like this could not have happened. They would have known the fellow was under a curse! It only shows what the world has come to. But I can tell you that if we ever get off this crazy runaway car, I intend to turn the Interboro wrong side out. They need’s think because I am an old man and retired that I am a nobody they can push around. My son Henry, the lawyer one, will build a fire under them—he knows people in this town.

“And I am not the only victim of the maniac. There is a pleasant, elderly woman here in the car with me. She was much frightened at first, but she had recognized me for a solid man, and now she stays close to me all the time. She is a Mrs. Herrick, and a quite nice woman. It was her idea that I write this down—it will help us refresh our memories when we come to testify.

“Just at the moment, we are speeding atrociously *downtown* along the Seventh Avenue line of the subway—but we are on the *uptown* express track! The first few times we tore through those other trains it was terrible—I thought we were sure to be killed—and even if we were not, I have to think of my heart. Dr. Steinback told me only last week how careful I should be. Mrs. Herrick has been very brave about it, but it is a scandalous thing to subject anyone to, above all such a kindly little person.

“The madman who seems to be directing us (if charging wildly up and down these tracks implies *direction*), is now looking out the front door, staring horribly at the gloom rushing at us. He is a big man and heavy set, very weathered and tough-looking. I am nearing eighty and slight.

“There is nothing I can do but wait for the final crash; for crash we must, sooner or later, unless some Interboro official has brains enough to shut off the current to stop us. If *he* escapes the crash, the police will know him by his heavy red beard and tattooing on the backs of his hands. The beard is square-cut and there cannot be another one like it in all New York.

“But I notice I have failed to put down how this insane ride began. My granddaughter, Mrs. Charles L. Terneck, wanted me to see the World’s Fair, and was to come in from Great Neck and meet me at the subway station. I will say that she insisted someone come with me, but I can take care of myself—I always have—even

if my eyes and ears are not what they used to be.

"The train was crowded, but somebody gave me a seat in a corner. Just before we reached the stop, the woman next to me, this Mrs. Herrick, had asked if I knew how to get to Whitestone from Flushing. It was while I was telling her what I knew about the buses that the train stopped and let everybody off the car but us. I was somewhat irritated at missing the station but knew that all I had to do was stay on the car, go to Flushing, and return. It was then that the maniac guard came in and behaved so queerly.

"This car was the last one in the train, and the guard had been standing where he belongs, on the platform. But he came into the car, walking with a curious rolling walk (but I do not mean to imply he was drunk, for I do not think so) and his manner was what you might call masterful, almost overbearing. He stopped at the middle door and looked very intensely out to the north, at the Sound.

"*'That is not the Scheldt!'* he called out, angrily, with a thick, foreign accent, and then he said *'Bah!'* loudly, in a tone of disgusted disillusionment.

"He seemed of a sudden to fly into a great fury. The train was just making its stop at the end of the line, in Flushing. He rushed to the forward platform and somehow broke the coupling. At the same moment, the car began running backward along the track by which we had come. There was no chance for us to get off, even if we had been young and active. The doors were not opened, it happened so quickly.

"Then he came into the car, muttering to himself. His eye caught the sign of painted tin they put in the windows to show the destination of the trains. He snatched the plate lettered *'Flushing'* and tore it to bits with his rough hands, as if it had been cardboard, throwing the pieces down and stamping on them.

"*'That is not Flushing. Not my Flushing—not Vlissingen! But I will find it. I will go there, and not all the devils in Hell nor all the angels in Heaven shall stop me!'*

"He glowered at us, beating his breast with his clenched fists, as if angry and resentful at us for having deceived him in some manner. It was then that Mrs. Herrick stooped over and took my hand. We had gotten up close to the door to step out at the World's Fair station, but the car did not stop. It continued its wild career straight on, at dizzy speed.

"*'Rugwaartsch!'* he shouted, or something equally unintelligi-

ble. *'Back I must go, like always, but yet will find my Vlissingen!'*

"Then followed the horror of pitching headlong into those trains! The first one we saw coming, Mrs. Herrick screamed. I put my arm around her and braced myself as best I could with my cane. But there was no crash, just a blinding succession of lights and colors, in quick winks. We seemed to go straight through that train, from end to end, at lightning speed, but there was not even a jar. I do not understand that, for I saw it coming, clearly. Since, there have been many others. I have lost count now, we meet so many, and swing from one track to another so giddily at the end of runs.

"But we have learned, Mrs. Herrick and I, not to dread the collisions—or say, passage—so much. We are more afraid of what the bearded ruffian who dominates this car will do next—surely we cannot go on this way much longer, it has already been many, many hours. I cannot comprehend why the stupid people who run the Interboro do not do something to stop us, so that the police could subdue this maniac and I can have Henry take me to the district attorney."

So read the first few pages of the notebook turned over to me by the Missing Persons Bureau. Neither Mrs. Herrick, nor Mr. Dennison, whose handwriting it is, has been found yet, nor the guard he mentions. In contradiction, the Interboro insists no guard employed by them is unaccounted for, and further, that they never had had a man of the above description on their payrolls.

On the other hand, they have as yet produced no satisfactory explanation of how the car broke loose from the train at Flushing.

I agree with the police that this notebook contains matter that may have some bearing on the disappearances of these two unfortunate citizens; yet here in the psychiatric clinic we are by no means agreed as to the interpretation of this provocative and baffling diary.

The portion I have just quoted was written with a fountain pen in a crabbed, tremulous hand, quite exactly corresponding to the latest examples of old Mr. Dennison's writing. Then we find a score or more of pages torn out, and a resumption of the record in indelible pencil. The handwriting here is considerably stronger and more assured, yet unmistakably that of the same person. Farther on, there are other places where pages have been torn from the book, and evidence that the journal was but intermittently kept. I quote now all that is legible of the remainder of it.

"Judging by the alternations of the cold and hot seasons, we have now been on this weird and pointless journey for more than ten years. Oddly enough, we do not suffer physically, although the interminable rushing up and down these caverns under the streets becomes boring. The ordinary wants of the body are strangely absent, or dulled. We sense heat and cold, for example, but do not find their extremes particularly uncomfortable, while food has become an item of far distant memory. I imagine, though, we must sleep a good deal.

"The guard has very little to do with us, ignoring us most of the time as if we did not exist. He spends his days sitting brooding at the far end of the car, staring at the floor, mumbling in his wild, red beard. On other days he will get up and peer fixedly ahead, as if seeking something. Again, he will pace the aisle in obvious anguish, flinging his outlandish curses over his shoulder as he goes. '*Verdoemd*' and '*verwenscht*' are the commonest ones—we have learned to recognize them—and he tears his hair in frenzy whenever he pronounces them. His name, he says, is Van Der Dechen, and we find it politic to call him 'captain.'

"I have destroyed what I wrote during the early years (all but the account of the very first day); it seems rather querulous and hysterical now. I was not in good health then, I think, but I have improved noticeably here, and that without medical care. Much of my stiffness, due to a recent arthritis, has left me, and I seem to hear better.

"Mrs. Herrick and I have long since become accustomed to our forced companionship, and we have learned much about each other. At first, we both worried a good deal over our families' concern about our absence. But when this odd and purposeless kidnapping occurred, we were already so nearly to the end of life (being of about the same age) that we finally concluded our children and grandchildren must have been prepared for our going soon, in any event. It left us only with the problem of enduring the tedium of the interminable rolling through the tubes of the Interboro.

"In the pages I have deleted, I made much of the annoyance we experienced during the early weeks due to flickering through oncoming trains. That soon came to be so commonplace, occurring as it did every few minutes, that it became as unnoticeable as our breathing. As we lost the fear of imminent disaster, our riding became more and more burdensome through the deadly monotony of the tunnels.

"Mrs. Herrick and I diverted ourselves by talking (and to think in my earlier entries in this journal I complained of her garrulousness!) or by trying to guess at what was going on in the city above us by watching the crowds on the station platforms. That is a difficult game because we are running so swiftly and there are frequent intervening trains. A thing that has caused us much speculation and discussion is the changing type of advertising on the bill-posters. Nowadays they are featuring the old favorites—many of the newer toothpastes and medicines seem to have been withdrawn. Did they fail, or has a wave of conservative reaction overwhelmed the country?

"Another marvel in the weird life we lead is the juvenescence of our home, the runaway car we are confined to. In spite of its unremitting use, always at top speed, it has become steadily brighter, more new-looking. Today it has the appearance of having been recently delivered from the builders' shops.

"I learned half a century ago that having nothing to do, and all the time in the world to do it in, is the surest way to get nothing done. In looking in this book, I find it has been ten years since I made an entry! It is a fair indication of the idle, routine life in this wandering car. The very invariableness of our existence has discouraged keeping notes. But recent developments are beginning to force me to face a situation that has been growing ever more obvious. The cumulative evidence is by now almost overwhelming that this state of ours has a meaning—has an explanation. Yet I dread to think the thing through—to call its name! Because there will be two ways to interpret it. Either it *is* as I am driven to conclude, or else I . . .

"I must talk it over frankly with Nellie Herrick. She is remarkably poised and level-headed, and understanding. She and I have matured a delightful friendship.

"What disturbs me more than anything is the trend in advertising. They are selling products again that were popular so long ago that I had actually forgotten them. And the appeals are made in the idiom of years ago. Lately it has been hard to see the posters, the station platforms are so full. In the crowds are many uniforms, soldiers and sailors. We infer from that there is another war—but the awful question is, 'What war?'

"Those are some of the things we can observe in the world over there. In our own little fleeting world, things have developed even

more inexplicably. My health and appearance, notably. My hair is no longer white! It is turning dark again in the back, and on top. And the same is true of Nellie's. There are other similar changes for the better. I see much more clearly and my hearing is practically perfect.

"The culmination of these disturbing signals of retrogression has come with the newest posters. It is their appearance that forces me to face the facts. Behind the crowds we glimpse new appeals, many and insistent—'BUY VICTORY LOAN BONDS!' From the number of them to be seen, one would think we were back in the happy days of 1919, when the soldiers were coming home from the World War.

"My talk with Nellie has been most comforting and reassuring. It is hardly likely that we should both be insane and have identical symptoms. The inescapable conclusion that I dreaded to put into words is so—it must be so. In some unaccountable manner, we are *unliving* life! Time is going backward! '*Rugwaartsch*,' the mad Dutchman said that first day when he turned back from Flushing; 'we will go backward'—to *his* Flushing, the one he knew. Who knows what Flushing he knew? It must be the Flushing of another age, or else why should the deranged wizard (if it is he who has thus reversed time) choose a path through time itself? Helpless, we can only wait and see how far he will take us.

"We are not wholly satisfied with our new theory. Everything does not go backward; otherwise how could it be possible for me to write these lines? I think we are like flies crawling up the walls of an elevator cab while it is in full descent. Their own proper movements, relative to their environment, are upward, but all the while they are being carried relentlessly downward. It is a sobering thought. Yet we are both relieved that we should have been able to speak it. Nellie admits that she has been troubled for some time, hesitating to voice the thought. She called my attention to the subtle way in which our clothing has been changing, an almost imperceptible de-evolution in style.

"We are now on the lookout for ways in which to date ourselves in this headlong plunging into the past. Shortly after writing the above, we were favored with one opportunity not to be mistaken. It was the night of the Armistice. What a night in the subway! Then followed, in inverse order, the various issues of the Liberty

Bonds. Over forty years ago—counting time both ways, forward, then again backward—I was up there, a dollar-a-year man, selling them on the streets. Now we suffer a new anguish, imprisoned down here in this racing subway car. The evidence all around us brings a nostalgia that is almost intolerable. None of us knows how perfect his memory is until it is thus prompted. But we cannot go up there, we can only guess of what is going on above us.

"The realization of what is really happening to us has caused us to be less antagonistic to our conductor. His sullen brooding makes us wonder whether he is not a fellow victim, rather than our abductor, he seems so unaware of us usually. At other times, we regard him as the principal in this drama of the gods and are bewildered at the curious twist of Fate that has entangled us with the destiny of the unhappy Van Der Dechen, for unhappy he certainly is. Our anger at his arrogant behavior has long since died away. We can see that some secret sorrow gnaws continually at his heart.

" 'There is *een vloek* over me,' he said gravely, one day, halting unexpectedly before us in the midst of one of his agitated paces of the aisle. He seemed to be trying to explain—apologize for, if you will—our situation. 'Accursed I am, damned!' He drew a great breath, looking at us appealingly. Then his black mood came back on him with a rush, and he strode away growling mighty Dutch oaths. 'But I will best them—God Himself shall not prevent me—not if it takes all eternity!'

"Our orbit is growing more restricted. It is a long time now since we went to Brooklyn, and only the other day we swerved suddenly at Times Square and cut through to Grand Central. Considering this circumstance, the type of car we are in now, and our costumes, we must be in 1905 or thereabouts. That is a year I remember with great vividness. It was the year I first came to New York. I keep speculating on what will become of us. In another year we will have plummeted the full history of the subway. What then? Will that be the end?

"Nellie is the soul of patience. It is a piece of great fortune, a blessing, that since we were doomed to this wild ride, we happened in it together. Our friendship has ripened into a warm affection that lightens the gloom of this tedious wandering.

"It must have been last night that we emerged from the caves

of Manhattan. Thirty-four years of darkness is ended. We are now out in the country, going west. Our vehicle is not the same, it is an old fashioned day coach, and ahead is a small locomotive. We cannot see engineer or fireman, but Van Der Dechen frequently ventures across the swaying, open platform and mounts the tender where he stands firmly with widespread legs, scanning the country ahead through an old brass long-glass. His uniform is more nautical than railroadish—it took the sunlight to show that to us. There was always the hint of salt air about him. We should have known who he was from his insistence on being addressed as captain.

"The outside world is moving backward! When we look closely at the wagons and buggies in the muddy trails alongside the right-of-way fence, we can see that the horses or mules are walking or running backward. But we pass them so quickly, as a rule, that their real motion is inconspicuous. We are too grateful for the sunshine and the trees after so many years of gloom to quibble about this topsy-turvy condition.

"Five years in the open has taught us much about nature in reverse. There is not so much difference as one would suppose. It took us a long time to notice that the sun rose in the west and sank in the east. Summer follows winter, as it always has. It was our first spring, or rather, the season that we have come to regard as spring, that we were really disconcerted. The trees were bare, the skies cloudy, and the weather cool. We could not know, at first sight, whether we had emerged into spring or fall.

"The ground was wet, and gradually white patches of snow were forming. Soon, the snow covered everything. The sky darkened and the snow began to flurry, drifting and swirling upward, out of sight. Later we saw the ground covered with dead leaves, so we thought it must be fall. Then a few of the trees were seen to have leaves, then all. Soon the forests were in the full glory of red and brown autumn leaves, but in a few weeks those colors turned gradually through oranges and yellows to dark greens, and we were in full summer. Our 'fall,' which succeeded the summer, was almost normal, except toward the end, when the leaves brightened into paler greens, dwindled little by little to mere buds and then disappeared within the trees.

"The passage of a troop train, its windows crowded with campaign-hatted heads and waving arms tells us another war has begun (or more properly, ended). The soldiers are returning from

Cuba. *Our* wars, in this backward way by which we approach and end in anxiety! More nostalgia—I finished that war as a major. I keep looking eagerly past the throngs on the platforms of the railroad stations as we sweep by them, hoping to sight a familiar face among the yellow-legged cavalry. More than eighty years ago it was, as I reckon it, forty years of it spent on the road to senility and another forty back to the prime of life.

"Somewhere among those blue-uniformed veterans am I, in my original phase, I cannot know just where because my memory is vague as to the dates. I have caught myself entertaining the idea of stopping this giddy flight into the past, of getting out and finding my way to my former home. Only, if I could, I would be creating tremendous problems—there would have to be some sort of mutual accommodation between my *alter ego* and me. It looks impossible, and there are no precedents to guide us.

"Then, all my affairs have become complicated by the existence of Nell. She and I have had many talks about this strange state of affairs, but they are rarely conclusive. I think I must have overestimated her judgment a little in the beginning. But it really doesn't matter. She has developed into a stunning woman and her quick, ready sympathy makes up for her lack in that direction. I glory particularly in her hair, which she lets down some days. It is thick and long and beautifully wavy, as hair should be. We often sit on the back platform and she allows it to blow free in the breeze, all the time laughing at me because I adore it so.

"Captain Van Der Dechen notices us not at all, unless in scorn. His mind, his whole being, is centered on getting back to Flushing—*his* Flushing, that he calls Vlissingen—wherever that may be in time or space. Well, it appears that he is taking us back, too, but it is backward in time for us. As for him, time seems meaningless. He is unchangeable. Not a single hair of that piratical beard has altered since that far-future day of long ago when he broke our car away from the Interboro train in Queens. Perhaps he suffers from the same sort of unpleasant immortality the mythical Wandering Jew is said to be afflicted with—otherwise why should he complain so bitterly of the curse he says is upon him?

"Nowadays he talks to himself much of the time, mainly about his ship. It is that which he hopes to find since the Flushing beyond New York proved not to be the one he strove for. He says he left it cruising along a rocky coast. He has either forgotten where he left it or it is no longer there, for we have gone to all the coastal

points touched by the railroads. Each failure brings fresh storms of rage and blasphemy; not even perpetual frustration seems to abate the man's determination or capacity for fury.

"That Dutchman has switched trains on us again! This one hasn't even Pintsch gas, nothing but coal oil. It is smoky and it stinks. The engine is a woodburner with a balloon stack. The sparks are very bad and we cough a lot.

"I went last night when the Dutchman wasn't looking and took a look into the cab of the engine. There is no crew and I found the throttle closed. A few years back that would have struck me as odd, but now I have to accept it. I did mean to stop the train so I could take Nell off, but there is no way to stop it. It just goes along, I don't know how.

"On the way back I met the Dutchman, shouting and swearing the way he does, on the forward platform. I tried to throw him off the train. I am as big and strong as he is and I don't see why I should put up with his overbearing ways. But when I went to grab him, my hands closed right through. The man is not real! It is strange I never noticed that before. Maybe that is why there is no way to stop the train, and why nobody ever seems to notice us. Maybe the train is not real, either. I must look tomorrow and see whether it casts a shadow. Perhaps even *we* are not . . .

"But Nell is real. I *know* that.

"The other night we passed a depot platform where there was a political rally—a torchlight parade. They were carrying banners. 'Garfield for President.' If we are ever to get off this train, we must do it soon.

"Nell says no, it would be embarrassing. I try to talk seriously to her about us, but she just laughs and kisses me and says let well enough alone. I wouldn't mind starting life over again, even if these towns do look pretty rough. But Nell says that she was brought up on a Kansas farm by a stepmother and she would rather go on to the end and vanish, if need be, than go back to it.

"That thing about the end troubles me a lot, and I wish she wouldn't keep mentioning it. It was only lately that I thought about it much, and it worries me more than death ever did in the old days. *We know when it will be!* 1860 for me—on the third day of August. The last ten years will be terrible—getting smaller, weaker, more helpless all the time, and winding up as a messy,

squally baby. Why, that means I have only about ten more years that are fit to live; when I was this young before, I had a lifetime ahead. It's not right! And now *she* has made a silly little vow—'until birth do us part!'—and made me say it with her!

"It is too crowded in here, and it jolts awfully. Nell and I are cooped up in the front seats and the captain stays in the back part—the quarterdeck, he calls it. Sometimes he opens the door and climbs up into the driver's seat. There is no driver, but we have a four-horse team and they gallop all the time, day and night. The captain says we must use a stagecoach because he has tried all the railroad tracks and none of them is right. He is not afraid that it has been stolen, for he says most men are afraid of it—it is a haunted ship, it appears, and brings bad luck.

"We passed two men on horses this morning. One was going our way and met the other coming. The other fellow stopped him and I heard him holler. 'They killed Custer and all his men!' and the man that was going the same way we were said, 'The bloodthirsty heathens! I'm a-going to jine!'

"Nellie cries a lot. She's afraid of Indians. I'm not afraid of Indians. I would like to see one.

"I wish it was a boy with me, instead of this little girl. Then we could do something. All she wants to do is play with that fool dolly. We could make some bows and arrows and shoot at the buffaloes, but she says that is wicked.

"I tried to get the captain to talk to me, but he won't. He just laughed and laughed and said,

"*Een tijd kiezán voor-op schip!*"

"That made me mad, talking crazy talk like that, and I told him so.

"'Time!' he bellows, laughing like everything. 'Twill all be right in time!' And he looks hard at me, showing his big teeth in his beard. 'Four—five—six hundred years—more—it is nothing. I have all eternity! But once more on my ship, I will get there. I have sworn it! You come with me and I will show you the sea—the great Indian Sea behind the Cape of Good Hope. Then some day, if those accursed head winds abate, I will take you home with me to Flushing. That I will, though the Devil himself, or all the—' And then he went off to cursing and swearing the way he always does in his crazy Dutchman's talk.

"Nellie is mean to me. She is too bossy. She says she will not play unless I write in the book. She says I am supposed to write something in the book every day. There is not anything to put in the book. Same old stagecoach. Same old captain. Same old everything. I do not like the captain. He is crazy. In the nighttime he points at the stars shining through the roof of the coach and laughs and laughs. Then he gets mad, and swears and curses something awful. When I get big again, I am going to kill him—I wish we could get away—I am afraid—it would be nice if we could find Mamma—"

This terminates the legible part of the notebook. All of the writing purporting to have been done in the stagecoach is shaky, and the letters are much larger than earlier in the script. The rest of the contents is infantile scribblings, or grotesque childish drawings. Some of them show feathered Indians drawing bows and shooting arrows. The very last one seems to represent a straight up and down cliff with wiggly lines at the bottom to suggest waves, and off a little way is a crude drawing of a galleon or other antique ship.

This notebook, together with Mr. Dennison's hat and cane and Mrs. Herrick's handbag, was found in the derailed car that broke away from the Flushing train and plunged off the track into the Meadows. The police are still maintaining a perfunctory hunt for the two missing persons, but I think the fact they brought this journal to us clearly indicates they consider the search hopeless. Personally, I really do not see of what help these notes can be. I fear that by now Mr. Dennison and Mrs. Herrick are quite inaccessible.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Illustration by Istvan Banyai

Fans who've been waiting for Jane Dentinger's third Jocelyn O'Roarke mystery will be mightily pleased with **Death Mask** (Scribners, \$16.95, 290 pp.) because it's a backstage mystery that deserves its name in lights. O'Roarke, a professional actress, is in the director's chair this time, directing George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* with a talented cast headed by her old friend and mentor, Frederick Revere. The production promises to fulfill its goal: to revive attendance at a lovely little theater and interest in its designation as an historical landmark. *Death Mask* is the reader's ticket to solid entertainment: literate dialogue, true backstage detail, humor, a bittersweet romantic development, and a crisp plot. There's even a theater ghost! *Death Mask* should be strictly "S.R.O."

The Last Laugh by John R. Riggs (St. Martin's, \$2.95, 191 pp.) is a tight little tale well worth your time. The setting—as crucial as one of the characters in this novel—is the small town of Oakalla (state unnamed). Snow is falling on the casket of Si Buckles, the town's barely tolerated practical joker. Si was one of a threesome that dated from their boyhood days; the quartet was completed by a beautiful woman, wife of one of the men. Newspaperman Garth Ryland, not a native, discovers Si's diaries and begins to run them in the paper. The small-town characters, headed by a likable pro-

tagonist, and a truly surprising plot development help place *The Last Laugh* on the recommended reading list.

Rocket to the Morgue by Anthony Boucher has been reprinted by IPL (\$4.95, 172 pp.), and it's a treat. The book was written in the 1940's, and is set in the science fiction-writing community in California. (Boucher alludes to himself and his wife as characters in the group.) Following *Nine Times Nine*, which IPL published last year, *Rocket* is billed as "Sister Ursula Solves Another Locked Room Classic," which—yep—pretty well describes the situation. What it doesn't say, however, is that Sister Ursula is bound to please fans of Sister Carol Anne O'Marie's novels and other mystery readers who appreciate a gentle, bright, and amusing older woman as amateur sleuth. For the mystery fans who also indulge in science fiction, this novel offers additional pleasures in the many, and varied conversations about the genre carried on between the fictional practitioners.

Linda Grant's **Random Access Murder** (Avon, \$2.95, 186 pp.) presents us with Catherine Sayler, head of her own private investigation agency in San Francisco. Her firm specializes in corporate security, and she has done well: she has a staff of loyal employees. But despite her firm's policy of avoiding cases that might involve violence, Catherine won't be able to stay out of the investigation into the brutal murder of a secretary: Catherine's P.I. boyfriend has been charged with the crime. If you're looking for a female sleuth who's bright, capable, and sympathetic, and a plot with a computer angle, then check out this one.

P.M. Carlson's series featuring Maggie Ryan has grown in popularity with each entry. Her latest, **Rehearsal for Murder** (Bantam, \$3.50, 210 pp.), should please fans on many levels. Maggie and her actor-husband Nick are learning to cope with a beautiful, beloved, but demanding new baby. Nick is rehearsing a new play starring a prickly prima donna—until tragedy strikes. Then Maggie, trying to find the time to involve herself in Nick's backstage sleuthing, accidentally becomes embroiled in another criminal setup. Carlson has tried to give us a maze with two centers, and I felt the solutions drew too heavily on coincidence. I also strongly wished that Maggie had made another choice at the novel's conclusion. Read it for yourself, and see.

Thomas Harris has followed up his stunning thriller, *The Red Dragon*, with another chilling portrait of criminal madness in **The Silence of the Lambs** (St. Martin's, \$18.95, 338 pp.). *Red Dragon*

fans will remember the brilliant and evil Dr. Hannibal Lecter, a mass murderer so deadly that he'd been captured (at great expense to the hero of the last book) and confined in a special cell with very special precautions. "Hannibal the Cannibal" returns again in *The Silence of the Lambs*, but Harris gives us a new protagonist in the character of Clarice Starling, promising FBI trainee. Take a twisted serial killer who is literally skinning his female victims; add an attractive and ambitious female FBI agent whose strings are being pulled by a wily old supervisor; then add Lecter, whom we begin to suspect of pulling *everyone's* strings. The result is a complex page-turner that offers fascinating psychological portraits (several of them characters we actually care something about) and almost non-stop suspense.

Joan Hess is the author of several fine mystery series. I just read **Mischief in Maggody** (St. Martin's, \$14.95, 202 pp.), and I recommend it to you. Our heroine is Sheriff Arly Hanks, who should be able to preside over her hometown of Maggody, Arkansas (population 755), with one hand tied behind her back. But Arly returns from vacation to find things stirred up by a newcomer to town, a psychic and tarot-card reader, and by a group of enterprising young whole-food nuts who have set up a store and commune. Arly's troubles are compounded by her pushy mother, Ruby Bee, and her slow-witted deputy (self-styled deputy). But it will take more than the local color—or a murder—to suppress the down-to-earth sense and humorous sensibilities of Arly Hanks. This is fresh, and lots of fun.

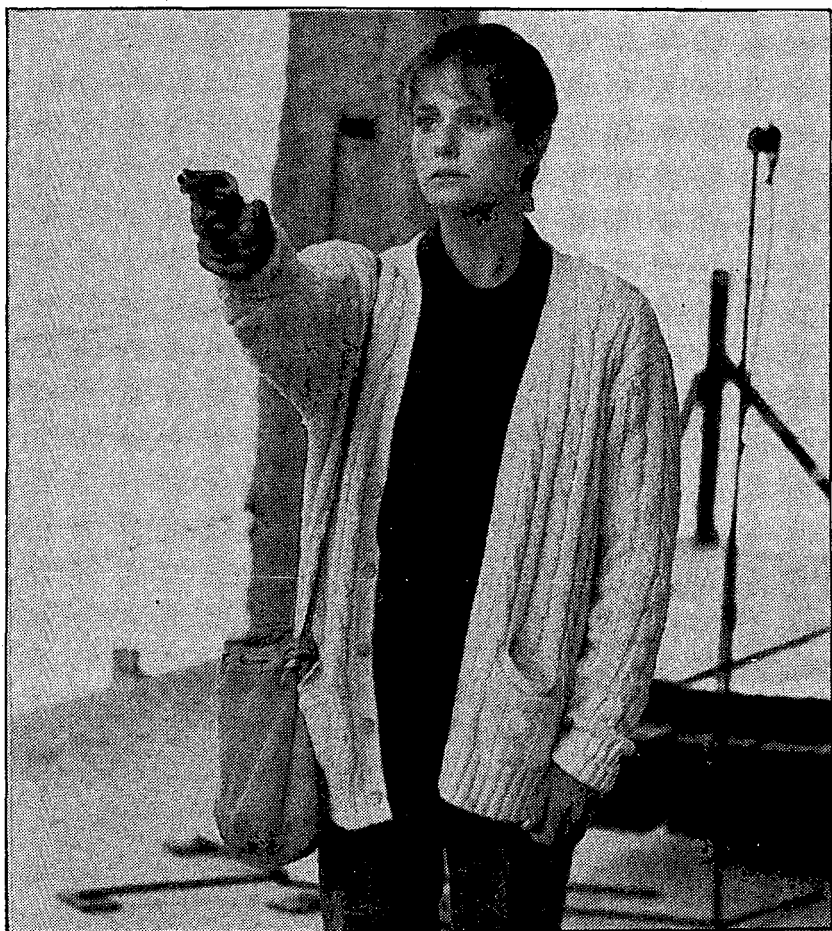
Marcia Muller's second Joanna Stark mystery, **There Hangs the Knife**, should cause readers to go about scrambling to locate the first book, *Cavalier in White* (soon to be out in paperback). I'll be right there, too, because *Knife* was mighty fine. Joanna Stark is intelligent, competent, successful, a mother of a grown son. We like this woman in spite of the fact that she's obviously in Europe for one reason only: to set up a fake painting that she feels her former lover will not be able to resist stealing. Tony Parducci is her quarry, and as an art security consultant, she would be at odds with him in the best of times because Tony Parducci is a well-known thief. But Parducci is also the father of Joanna's child, and she still hasn't forgiven him for abandoning her twenty years before. There's lots of fascinating art detail here, some finely-drawn characters, and a balance of suspense. I'd like to meet Joanna Stark again, perhaps on a case that isn't as emotionally demanding, be-

cause she makes good company. (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 211 pp.)

Keith Peterson's **There Fell a Shadow** (Bantam, \$3.50, 200 pp.) opens in a New York City press club bar during a blizzard. John Wells, respected crime reporter for a metropolitan paper, is drinking with some buddies when Timothy Colt joins them. Colt is a foreign correspondent superstar, a charismatic man, pleased to join two former war correspondent colleagues. Wells hears war stories told by the three men, and witnesses a strange incident when a fourth man is spotted at the bar. From its evocative snowstorm and its intriguing bar tale, *Shadow* proceeds to race along to a satisfying conclusion. Peterson gives us a very sympathetic hero in Wells, a lot of newspaper biz background, and a war-torn drama that gives this mystery a weighty and heartbreaking center. *The Trapdoor* was the debut of John Wells, ace reporter, and I have it set aside for reading next.

L.B. Greenwood, author of a previous case of Sherlock Holmes, has followed up with **Sherlock Holmes and the Case of Sabina Hall** (Simon & Schuster, \$16.95, 191 pp.). I'm one of those Holmes fans who will never tire of reading his exploits, so I welcome Greenwood's continuation of the series. This one opens with a request for a physician that comes via a schoolmate of Holmes's, and the master sleuth urges his good friend Watson to comply. Thus the two men find themselves snowbound in a mansion in the English countryside, too late to assist Watson's patient but not too late to catch a murderer.

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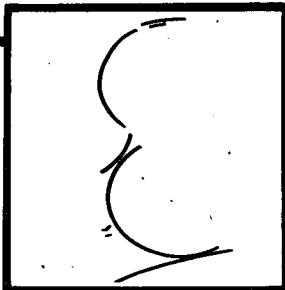


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Debra Winger plays an undercover agent, Cathy Weaver, who falls in love with the subject of her investigation in *Betrayed*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Betrayed is a frightening film. In it, Costa-Gavras (who also directed such political thrillers as *Z*, *State of Siege* and *Missing*) gives us a look at a dark side of America, the white supremacist movement. He shows us this underground alliance of individuals and groups dedicated to the elimination of Jews, blacks, and other minorities in the belief they must "return America to the real Americans."

We see this movement through the eyes of a pretty, young F.B.I. agent (Debra Winger) who goes undercover in a heartland American town as part of an investigation into the murder of a controversial Chicago radio talk show host. The suspects are white supremacists who scrawled their telltale "ZOG" ("Zionist Occupation Government") at the scene.

Agent Cathy Weaver, a modern Chicago career woman, enters the film as Katie Phillips, itinerate combine operator from Texas, a real cowgirl. Her work brings her into the path of Gary Simmons (Tom Berenger), a goodlooking farmer, widower, father of two, and suspect in the Chicago murder. The two become friendly and fall in love. It would have been hard not to fall in love with the idyllic life presented to the Winger character—the rugged-looking, yet sensitive, all-American type Vietnam war hero in Simmons; the family farm; son Joey and a six-year-old daughter, Rachel (Marie Valdez). Hand this to a woman who we find out had lost her parents in a car crash as a child and who calls the F.B.I. the closest thing she has to family, and she'll fall hard. And she does.

As Katie Phillips fits snugly

into the new family life she's longed for, the real Gary Simmons begins to emerge. This devoted dad and loving, tender man is a dangerous racist and anti-Semite and a no-holds-barred member of the underground movement devoted to taking America back from what it calls the "Zionist Occupation Government" and its "nigger police." His friends and fellow townfolk are of like mind, although they look like simple middle Americans who picnic on the Fourth of July and listen to ball games and do just what other Americans do.

In a terrifying scene which illustrates just how dangerous Simmons and his friends really are, Gary insists Katie accompany him hunting one rainy night. The prey, it turns out, is a cowering black man supplied by the local police. Dogs lead the chase. The hunters' weapon of choice: the Mac-10, a fully automatic machine pistol—the same type of gun used in the Chicago killing.

With this hunt the assignment becomes too much for Katie. In an emergency meet with her F.B.I. colleagues at a nearby airstrip she asks to be let out. "I'm in too deep," she tells them. "My loyalties are all screwed up." She's told to return and link Gary to the Chicago murder.

It becomes a question of survival for Katie. How can she

pretend to still love a man of whom she is now afraid? Does she still have feelings for him?

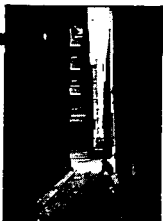
Gary doesn't want any secrets between him and his new love and Katie is forced to get more involved in his world of hatred and violence. When Gary promises her a family camping trip, even this seemingly innocent activity gets twisted. At the campsite children are given target practice and crosses are burned while campers sing "Amazing Grace." With her growing involvement, Katie even takes part in a robbery.

Betrayed is an intense, emotional movie. At one moment in the film, sweet little Rachel innocently spouts the bigoted propaganda of her father, telling Katie about "niggers and rabbis." The next moment she tells her about a cow kiss (a big lick on the cheek).

We see love of country—the twisted devotion from Gary's kind and Katie's view of America as a place where you're free to do as you please if you don't hurt people.

Then entire cast of *Betrayed* is first-rate. Debra Winger manages to maintain her shaky cover while her character becomes an emotional wreck. Tom Berenger makes the transition from shy widower to fanatical hate-monger with frightening ease. This is not a film for the faint-hearted.

THE STORY THAT WON



The August Mysterious Photo-Kritzer of Coral Springs, Don Shaffer of Belmont, California; Suzanne S. Wheal of Cross of Sacramento, California; James T. Stillwell of Clinton, Hill, North Carolina; Christine McClurg Stonehouse of Port Clinton, Ohio; Marilyn K. Goode of Midlothian, Virginia; Lane Olinghouse of Everett, Washington; Alan Home of San Jose, California; Marcia Johnston of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; Julia Happe of Tampa, Florida; and Colleen F. Glenn of Corvallis, Oregon.

graph contest was won by Deborah Florida. Honorable mentions go to fornia; Alice K. Verhoff of Mead-Montana of Walnut Creek, California; Alfred W. ia; J. David Eva of Abilene, Texas; Missouri; Jay Reeves of Chapel

THE PURLOINED COLLAR by Deborah Kritzer

It was a catnip kind of day, warm and lazy. I was sitting on my desk at the office of Top Cat Investigations, just batting a wad of paper back and forth. Then she walked through the door. She was the type of feline that any tom would categorize as purrfect. I jumped down and offered her a padded rocking chair.

She didn't pussyfoot around. She came straight to the point. Her diamond collar had been stolen as she lay napping on her terrace.

This case piqued my curiosity. The M.O. sounded familiar. The thief had to be Morris the cat burglar. His current hangout was the alley next to St. Catherine's Cathedral.

Without hesitation I catapulted out the window, scampered across the hot tin roof, and stood poised at the top of the cathedral, observing the alley below. Morris was sitting on the curb, turning the diamond collar round and round in his hands. I let out a piercing shriek and pounced down in front of him. Subduing Morris into a catatonic state with my hypnotic green eyes, I snatched the collar with my claws from Morris's hand and scurried back to my client.

Her eyes widened as I presented her with the purloined collar. Making a soft throaty sound, she nuzzled my neck in gratitude. Then she glided toward the door.

"Wait!" I called. "I don't even know your name."

She turned with a secret smile and winked at me. Then she disappeared, leaving only her smile behind.

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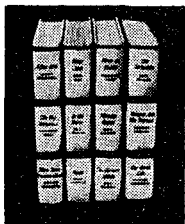
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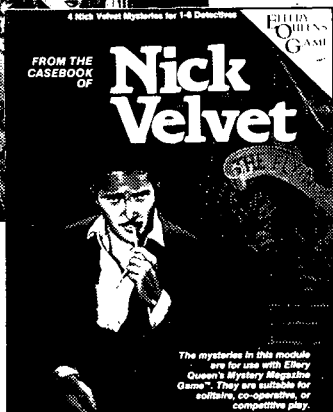
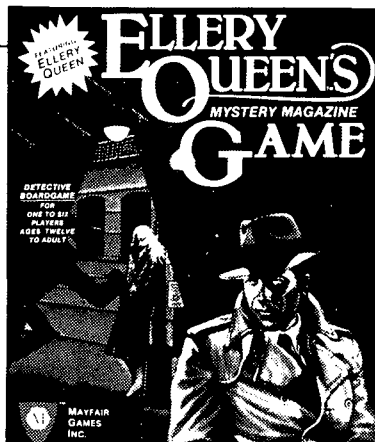
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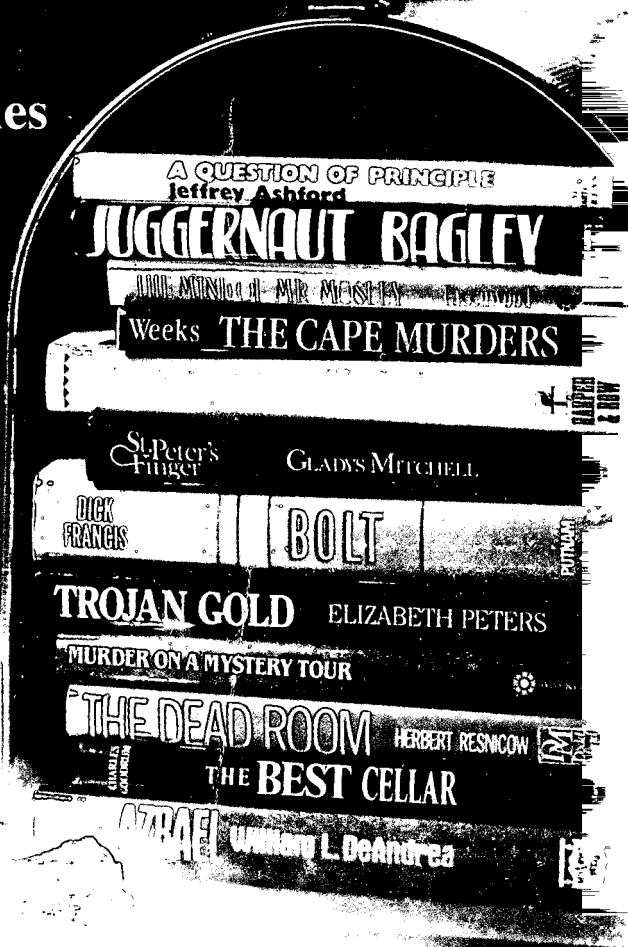
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